HOMESCHOOLING WITHIN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

by

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Abstract

Homeschooling through the public school system is a relatively new trend in education. This qualitative study focuses on the experiences of six families participating in public school homeschooling programs in British Columbia, Canada. (Parents were interviewed and the interviews were recorded with transcripts becoming the primary data for this research.) Parents’ motivations for homeschooling through the public system, rather than homeschooling on their own, are centered on financial advantages, in terms of refunds, and on support and guidance from trained teachers.

Parents perceive public school classrooms negatively. Lack of attention to individual learning styles, large class-sizes, grade-aged groupings, teacher style, and negative socialization in and outside of the classroom are common criticisms.

Conclusions of the study include suggestions for teachers and program organizers. The wider community, including different aged children, mentors, and elders are commonly viewed as unused resources.
Dedication

This work is dedicated to my family. You have shown patience and the ability to carry on while I slowly plodded to completion. To my wife Sharon, all my love and thanks for all your support and sacrifices. To my sons Kieran, Jack, Cameron and Jimmy, I thank you for being the wonderful individuals you are. I love you all, and could not have done this without you.
“Grandpa took one oar, the small boy of six the other. The mother in the stern held a sleeping child under her shawl and grasped the steering paddle. A young girl beside her settled into a shawl-swathed lump. Children tumbled themselves among the household goods and immediately slept.

Loosed from her mooring, the big canoe glided forward. The man and the boy rowed her into the current. When she met it she swerved like a frightened horse-accepted- gave herself to its guiding, her wolf’s head stuck proud and high above the water...

Our going was imperceptible, the woman’s steering paddle the only thing that moved, its silent cuts stirring phosphorus like white fire.”

Emily Carr, *Klee Wyck*

“I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.”

Mark Twain
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the families that allowed me to share their experiences homeschooling their children.

I would also like to acknowledge Professor Meguido Zola, who helped me when I was most in need, and guided me towards completing my story.
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**Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to explore the recent phenomenon of public school districts providing programs to parents choosing to homeschool their children, rather than sending them to a classroom. This research is qualitative in nature, and is based largely on interviews with six families who were enrolled with public school homeschooling programs. The scope of this work includes a general history of homeschooling, particulars of homeschooling experiences of these families in British Columbia, and recommendations summarizing parents', and the author's, concerns with the educational system.

Parental motivations for homeschooling in the public school system focus on financial considerations as well as philosophical and pedagogical differences with classroom schooling. Other motivations for parents included avoiding the negative effects of socialization in schools, and exposing children to a broader range of peers and community members than was possible in school. Why do parents leave the most popular form of schooling to live, work, and teach with their own children?

The relationship between public schools, and parents of homeschoolers is one that is not always trusting and productive. Some teachers in the public school system have very negative views towards homeschooling, despite the system they work in trying to embrace parents teaching their own. The public school system is encouraging homeschooling parents to enroll, and accept a certain, ill-defined supervision. Trying to...
clearly understand this rapprochement between public schools and homeschoolers is the journey within this thesis.

**Rapprochement and the Cold War**

After speaking about my reasons for studying public school involvement in homeschooling, one university colleague, a fellow Master’s student, referred to what I was doing as trying to understand the *rapprochement* between homeschoolers and the public school system. When I heard the word ‘rapprochement’, I envisioned the United States of America and “the West” in dialogue to find common ground with former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and “Eastern Bloc” countries during the latter part of the 20th Century. Rapprochement meant an attempt to end the ‘cold war’ and all the divisiveness, fear, hyperbole and mistrust that went with that period. As I researched homeschooling, I began to see this metaphor as a helpful and accurate one. When I spoke with my fellow public school teachers about my research project, I almost always heard negative condemnations and anecdotes about homeschooling. In speaking with some homeschooling parents, I often heard an equally negative opinion expressed about public schools. Neither side had much good to say about the other. Yet here I was, a public school teacher, trying to understand and explain one side to the other and find a middle ground.

As I explored the debate between homeschoolers and those advocating the importance of public schooling, particularly regarding the issue of socialization, I discovered what at first seemed like an oxymoron: there existed, if only at a pilot stage, public school/homeschooling programs. I had to find out more, and, indeed, I hoped to
find out that these two sides were starting a dialogue, seeing past philosophical ideologies and developing more cordial relations; a rapprochement. I also wanted to know if either side was learning anything from each other, and if homeschoolers and the public school system could indeed learn to work together for the benefit of both.

As a public school teacher who has taught for over ten years, I have some understanding of the public system and its structures. I support the right to a free, high-quality public education for all, and believe it is an essential plank in the development and maintenance of a just, socially progressive society. Public schooling, in spite of some misgivings, represents, to me, one of the best ways of educating children to become capable, thoughtful adults. At times, I see myself defending public education against accusations of it being poorly run, in crisis, failing children, not serving the needs of the modern world, overly crowded, unaccountable, and uninspired, to name but a few criticisms.

I see, and am part of, a system designed to serve a massive need in society. Public schools are designed, in theory, to give free and equal access to a quality education for all children, regardless of class, color, or religion. They serve as one of the most central and universal institutions in any community, and are often the only truly common, long-term experience to be shared by a community. Public schools are often at the heart of a neighbourhood.

The more I spoke with homeschoolers, and the more I read, the more I began to understand what motivated some parents to want to teach their own children. As I expected, religious issues and the desire to teach Christian values not permitted in public
schools was an important factor for some parents. However this was not as dominant a motivation of the parents involved in this study, as I had earlier expected.

In their book *The Unfinished Revolution*, John Abbott and Terry Ryan outline some of the major changes in education over the last 30 years. Abbott, a former teacher at Manchester Grammar School, Headmaster, and director of the Education 2000 project in the United Kingdom, opens his book with a dedication “to all those who know that the current structures of formal education are fundamentally flawed and who wish, with all their hearts and minds, to rectify this”¹ One of Abbott’s fundamental assertions is that most schools do not allow young people to take control of their own education and that much of the model of current education still follows the needs of the industrial revolution. Abbott and Ryan argue for a constructivist - and apprenticeship - based approach to learning that takes account of recent neuroscientific findings. Political ideologies that stress centralized, standardized, accountable systems of formal learning based exclusively on classroom instruction are seen as the mantras of current educational reform that fail to offer a credible alternative. Another key assertion with many homeschooling parents is that relationships within the community, and the bond between generations, are essential to a well-educated person. This idea of the educated person, not just student, is part of lifelong learning.

I first heard John Abbott at a school district - sponsored lecture to some 500 teachers and administrators in 2003. He spoke of the need to wean children from their reliance and dependence on teachers and to see learning and education as much more

than just what happens inside of a classroom. His metaphoric theme was whether we were educating for battery-hens or free-range chickens. One size does not fit all, he argued. Throughout his presentation I kept thinking that if this kind of speaker was being invited by the largest school district in British Columbia to address educators, then a rapprochement between homeschoolers and public schools was indeed possible. Abbott reminded me that change is part of education, and also that alternative education is not just a concept from the 1970’s, but is an ever-evolving reality.

Alternative education is something that I, the author of this thesis, have experienced and hold dear to who I am. As I searched for a reason, a rationale, to why I wished to spend months/years looking at homeschooling I began to see that as my ideas about public schooling and schooling in general were being challenged, that a cold war was happening within me. Try as I did to remain impartial and be an academic observer, my emotions and opinions were never far off and the more I discussed my project, particularly with disapproving and occasionally entrenched colleagues, the more I found my internal conflict building. The cold war was not just between homeschoolers and institutional education, but also within myself, a practicing public school teacher and parent.

During the day, I would assume my role as public school elementary teacher of children. I have taught social development classes for children with behavioral problems, as well as grades 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6. In the evening and late into the night, I would assume my role as graduate student. The more I read and the more I discussed motivations and concerns of homeschoolers, the more I began to question my own role in schooling, teaching, educating, and guiding children. I began to see interviewees’
criticisms of schools and of teaching practices played out, not just with my colleagues and my school district, but also in me. Class sizes, single age grade-grouping, socialization, classroom management, children's individual learning styles, teacher burnout, good and bad teaching; all these issues seemed to now jump out at me daily as I tried to understand the motivation of parents who were choosing to either leave the school system, or never enter it at all. As I listened to the ideas of homeschooling parents, I wanted to be the kind of teacher that many of them sought, yet continually felt bound and restricted in my ability to do so simply because of the system I was a part of. My critical view of public education was changing from neutrality to an ever-stronger questioning of what, and how, schools teach.

As a parent of four children, three of whom are of school age, I could not help but see criticisms about schooling from my research playing out among my own children. The more I struggled with wanting the best for my own children's learning, the more I felt myself entering cold-war territory. Objectivity and theories of the public good of mass schooling held less and less influence over me compared to my biased, selfish desire to have my children experience success and be taught in the way I would teach them if I could. Rote memorization, 100 question drill sheets, exposure to negative peer modeling, and a child speaking tearfully of himself as a failure at school had me questioning what was happening at my local school. Excitable, energetic temperament and a hands-on, kinesthetic, interpersonal learning style could not be completely accommodated for with class sizes in the high twenties. I support my local school and know it has many very good teachers, yet increasingly my spouse and I found ourselves looking for alternative choices.
One of my primary hopes for this thesis is to help educators understand the motivations of homeschoolers, and possibly learn from these parents by changing some aspects of how teachers perceive and deal with parents who choose this alternative option. It has been my experience that teachers and administrators are ill informed about homeschooling and are largely disapproving of the practice. For public schools to improve and augment their homeschooling programs, this negative attitude needs to be addressed. Stereotypes, prejudice and misconceptions, if not addressed, simply lead to hardening of views and do nothing to reduce tensions.

The Berlin Wall, which for generations symbolized the separation of Eastern and Western Europe, fell. The Cold War wound down and relations improved between old adversaries. This wall still exists between some public school advocates and some homeschoolers. It is my hope that this minor work will, along with encouraging further research, somehow contribute to a better mutual understanding of both parties' interests.

**Study Limitations**

The major limitation of this study is the small sample size of six formal interviews. With such a small sample size, generalizations cannot be made. Due to the small sample size and the qualitative nature of this study, the data is largely anecdotal in nature. The themes that may emerge are not intended to serve as definitive statements about homeschooling. Rather they are intended to surface important questions, issues and insights into parents' perceptions.
Looking Back

“Personally, I'm always ready to learn, although I don't always like being taught.”
Winston Churchill

Prior to the 20th century, teaching a child at home was the norm. Johann Pestalozzi wrote How Gertrude Teaches Her Children in 1801. This early ‘manual’ was aimed at mothers, who Pestalozzi considered children’s first educators. One of the earliest people to formally research homeschooling in North America was Raymond Moore. Along with his wife Dorothy, Moore sought to find what age was ideal for children to enter formal education. The conclusion was that 8-12 years of age was appropriate. Their early research suggested that nearsightedness, dyslexia and hyperactivity could be the results of too early an attempt at introducing academic learning to children. Over time the Moore’s research led them to believe that homeschooling represented one of the best options available to parents for the education of their children. Moore’s writings also presented a Christian perspective and have been widely published. John Holt was another pioneer of the American homeschool movement. Initially an advocate for school reform, Holt came to the conclusion that homeschooling was the best option for change. Two of Holt’s books, How Children Fail (1964) and Teach Your Own (1981) helped to popularize homeschooling. Another critic of schools who has received much attention from homeschoolers is John Taylor Gatto, author of Dumbing Us Down, (1992). According to Isabel Lyman (1998) Holt’s message appealed to the countercultural left of the 1970’s, which was the dominant group homeschooling at the time. By the mid 1980’s Lyman argues that Moore, a former missionary, was influencing fundamentalist Christians, who were becoming the predominant homeschooling group.
Another American researcher is Brian Ray, who formed the National Home Education Research Institute to advocate for homeschooling and build a statistical base of information showing the successes of homeschooling. Ray (1994) along with the Home School Legal Defense Association of Canada conducted a very large nation-wide study of homeschoolers in Canada.

Motivations for parent’s homeschooling are numerous. Nicol (1993) identified two basic motivations: religious reasons and pedagogical reasons. Nicol cites Llewellyn (1991, p.10) as suggesting many in the past saw homeschooling as “fundamentalist Christian”, subversive, or illegitimate. Lange (1999) identified five major categories why parents in Minnesota chose homeschooling. These were educational philosophy, special needs of the child, school climate, family lifestyle and parenting philosophy, and religion and ethics.

Van Galen (1991) distinguishes parents motivated to homeschool as being either ideologues or pedagogues. Ideologues were concerned by the content in schools, whereas pedagogues were concerned with the methods of teaching. Van Galen’s theoretical framework has been widely used to identify motivations for homeschooling. Mayberry & Knowles (1989) used Van Galen’s framework to understand parent’s motivations for homeschooling. Mayberry (1995) and Mayberry & Knowles (1989) stated that pedagogues were motivated by a belief that the fundamental structure of public education was flawed, and ideologues were opposed to the content of public schools. Knowles, Marlow & Muchmore (1992) looked at cooperation between homeschoolers and school districts and suggested that virtual schools via the Internet would offer further
opportunities for cooperation. They also concluded that parents were pressuring schools for more support.

Several authors have written about relations between school districts and homeschoolers (Lines, 2000; Repetski, 2001; Stoppler, 1998; R. Smith, 2001; Fager & Brewster, 2000; Lange, 1999; P.T.Hill, 2000). Patricia M. Lines wrote numerous reports on partnerships between families and schools, including longitudinal studies of district programs over 3-4 year periods. Successful programs, according to Lines, require four key features: 1, superintendent support; 2, teacher support following the launch of programs; 3, a flexible and responsive curriculum; and 4, the support of some local homeschoolers. Lines (2000) show the diversity of programs being offered to homeschoolers. Lines (1998) also provide statistical data on U.S. homeschooling populations and growth trends.

In the year 2000, *The Peabody Journal of Education* dedicated a 300 page, double edition to the subject of homeschooling. This edition provides a broad range of opinion and ideas on homeschooling as well as excellent bibliographic information.

Canadian research by Common and MacMullen (1986) presented information on the rapid increase in the number of Canadians homeschooling. Luffman (1997) presented a statistical profile of individuals learning at home in Canada. Arai (2000) concluded that although motivations could be ideological or pedagogical, that these two distinctions were insufficient to describe all motivations. Arai found that motivations also included parent's own negative experiences at school, a desire to strengthen or preserve the unity of the nuclear family, to live an alternate lifestyle, and/or to assert their parental right to

There are a growing number of Canadian theses on homeschooling. Smith (2001) looked at virtual schooling in Alberta, finding a perceived need by participants for more face-to-face interactions, improved math programs and a need on the part of teachers to keep up with technology and develop programming. Ruff (1999) followed a dozen Christian homeschooling families in Atlantic Canada who felt public schools did not allow them to provide a Christian atmosphere in which Bible studies and devotion could be part of their children's education. Stoppler (1998) studied the motivations, expectations and experiences of homeschoolers in Northern British Columbia. Watkins (1997) studied differences in academic achievement between homeschooled and conventionally schooled children, based on results from the Alberta Provincial Achievement Testing Program. Watkins concluded that homeschooled children who took part in her study were not suffering academically from their homeschool experiences. Repetski (2001) studied homeschooling parent's perceptions of services to them in Regina following changes to legislation and policy.

In British Columbia, changes to legislation affecting homeschoolers has led to debates about the merits and disadvantages of enrolling or registering. The Home School Legal Defense Association of Canada (2002) is suspicious of B.C. government changes. The British Columbia Teacher's Federation (2002) has also expressed concerns about
homeschooling in British Columbia, particularly regarding the working conditions of teachers.

Canadian research on homeschooling is far behind studies done in the United States, however that gap is decreasing as district and provincial policy makers, teachers, academics and parents, seek more Canadian based information. By all accounts homeschooling is continuing to increase in popularity, and research interest will likely follow this trend. Advocates of homeschooling have proven highly effective at lobbying governments and producing volumes of research on the positive benefits of homeschooling. Public school involvement in developing programming for homeschoolers has both increased awareness of homeschooling as an option, and necessitated further understanding of homeschooling. There continues to be much contention over appropriate amounts of government involvement in homeschooling. [No longer on the periphery, homeschooling is becoming a mainstream option]. Once largely the domain of conservative Christians unhappy with public school secularism, it has grown to include diverse families with multiple motivations.

The roots of modern homeschooling appear to have grown from the 1960’s and 70’s, during a time of societal change and educational experimentation in North America. It has proven to be one of the fastest growing educational alternatives. Recent involvement by public school districts suggests a major shift in accepting this alternative approach.
Research Design and Methodology

This study uses qualitative research methods to examine homeschooling parents’ perceptions of public school district’s homeschooling programs in British Columbia. Before initiating the gathering of data, and while deciding on an appropriate research methodology, I spoke with colleagues who had done qualitative research, as well as read a number of sources on qualitative research methodology (e.g. Glaser & Strauss (1967); Glaser, (1992) Bloor, Franklin, Thomas, Robson, (2001); Lindlof, (1995); McLaughlin, (1986); Seidman, (1991). I decided to use semi-structured interviews, loosely based on action research as my main methodology for this study, as I believed this would allow the interviewees ideas to guide the thesis development.

This chapter explains the theoretical perspectives, data sources, data gathering, and ethical considerations of this study.

Theoretical Perspective

This research has, in part, followed the grounded theory method as laid out by Bob Dick\(^2\). It is part of an Action Research approach to research. Dick bases much of this theory on Glaser’s work on grounded theory. Unlike many research methods that aim to prove or disprove a thesis, grounded theory is an emergent methodology. The aim, as Glaser writes, is to discover the theory implicit in the data. Data can be gathered through interviews, observations, and conversations. Following interviews, notes are taken to establish categories or themes. Transcripts of interviews are coded to identify developing themes. Constant comparison is at the heart of this process. Initially, one compares

interview to interview and theory emerges. Once a theme or theory has been identified then you compare data to the theory. As categories and themes emerge from the interviews your core categories or theories are noted. Data is sorted according to which category it falls into. There is a continuing search for evidence that disconfirms the emerging theory. There will be categories that arise with high frequency from the interview data; these will help you identify the key theory/theories that emerge from your research. In short, says Dick, in using grounded theory methodology you assume that the theory is concealed in your data for you to discover.

**Speaking with Parents**

The taped interviews with parents of homeschoolers were the basis of data for this research. Parents were chosen who had at least one child enrolled with a public homeschool, and were willing to discuss their experiences on tape. Also, during the course of this research I engaged in discussions with leaders of homeschool groups, administrators of homelearner programs, and officials representing various homeschooling organizations. These conversations were not recorded, but provided opportunity to raise questions and further clarify my own understanding of homeschooling. At an annual homeschooler's conference I met the president of the British Columbia Home Learners Association, who provided a great deal of contact information for various groups throughout British Columbia. I also had informal conversations with numerous parents. These informal conversations were particularly helpful to probe for clarifications on themes that I felt were emerging from my semi-
structured interviews. These conversations were an additional source of data (Dick, 2000, p.5) and I wrote down notes from phone calls, or discussions I had with homeschoolers and others, including teachers, administrators and lay people. The notes were reviewed looking to find major themes and trends. Each interview was compared to past ones and by the sixth interview repetitions and similar answers emerged to suggest the inherent shared experiences of the families. The emergent nature of qualitative research encourages the themes not to be proved or disproved, but to develop from the shared experiences.

Data was also gathered from various literary sources, journal, and websites. One particularly useful source was an edition of the Peabody Journal of Education (2000), which presented numerous articles and research on homeschooling. Websites on the Internet offered a great deal of information on homeschooling.

In searching for people involved in homeschooling I sought people who matched the following criteria: 1) they are parents of homeschool students, 2) the parents were involved in a public school district model of homeschooling, or had explored the public school model and chosen not to pursue it, and 3) they were willing to discuss their motivations for homeschooling and articulate their experiences with homeschool programs. Requests for interviewees were posted on the website of the British Columbia Home Based Learning Home Page. This yielded six responses, of which two were:

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4 Another indication of the growth of homeschooling is the increase in the marketing towards homeschoolers. There are thousands of sites addressing homeschooling issues and hundreds of sites offering sales and services. The publishing industry has responded with specific teaching materials targeting homeschoolers. Conferences for homeschooling attract an industry of specialists marketing their products and services. Quantifying the growth of the homeschool services industry would be another interesting area for further research on the phenomenon on homeschooling.
interviewed. The other four were not interviewed either due to distance, or because of problems in scheduling a time to meet. One parent declined after I said that I was a public school teacher, saying she felt public schools should not be involved in homeschooling and that she was uncomfortable in sharing information with a school employee.\textsuperscript{5} Even though I stressed that her opinions would remain anonymous this parent expressed suspicions of the research design. This view is consistent with other home-based learners cited by Mayberry, Knowles, Ray and Marlow (1995). Local support groups for homeschoolers were also contacted and given the author's contact information to be passed on to those interested in participating in the hopes of providing a diverse selection. People met at homeschooling conferences were later contacted to conduct interviews, and others contacted me at the recommendation of a family member.

Interviews were arranged and participants were given the opportunity to select the interview location. Typically, we would meet in the kitchen or living room of the interviewee's home for forty-five minutes to an hour. One interview was less than 30 minutes. At the beginning of the interviews I reviewed the purpose of my study and explained that I would tape the discussion in order to transcribe the interviews to text.

Initially, I had hoped to meet with the parents without the children around so that we could have an uninterrupted discussion.\textsuperscript{6} Not only was this unrealistic, but it proved

\textsuperscript{5} This experience is similar to that expressed by Joe Repetski, a school principal in Regina, Saskatchewan, who describes an encounter where he was viewed suspiciously by a parent he wished to interview for his research. See Repetski, Joe Effects on services to home-based educators following changes to legislation and policy. Thesis (M.Ed.) University of Regina, 2001

\textsuperscript{6} Perhaps this is similar to a teaching practice of meeting with the parents of a child (Parent/Teacher interviews) and not including the child. This is a practice that as a teacher I have done, but prefer not to. Including the children in discussions about them makes sense, if they are to learn of their parent's expectations and how they are "performing" at school. This attitude perhaps says more about me as a
to be an unwarranted belief. There were few, if any, interruptions that affected the interview.

Gathering Stories

Early on in my search, I joined the British Columbia Home Learner’s Association (BCHLA), having identified them as a broadly based, umbrella organization with a long history, informative website and access to many resources on the topic of homeschooling. BCHLA is non-denominational and acts as advocate for the rights of parents to choose homeschooling. At an Annual General Meeting, at Homeschooling conferences and through discussions with the BCHLA president I began to see the motivations to often be more about rejecting the state of schooling and its structures than any other factor. Deani Van Pelt writes that up to 55% of parents “were home educating to avoid negative aspects of schooling such as safety concerns, frustrating experiences with the system, and wasted time. (Van Pelt, 2004, p.15.)”⁷ An Internet search of sites about homeschooling, books on homeschooling and articles on homeschooling almost always include the condemnation of one or more aspects of public schooling.

I developed a series of guiding questions to interview homeschool parents in a semi-structured format. The questions provided some structure to the interview, but also provided enough flexibility to allow for conversations to evolve.

The following 12 questions guided the semi-structured interviews:

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1. Could you describe the thoughts, discussions and debates you had when considering homeschooling?

2. Why did you / or why didn’t you, choose to enroll in a public school program for homeschoolers?

3. What appeals to you about the program you have enrolled in?

4. Was there one pivotal event that caused you to choose homeschooling?

5. There are parents who choose homeschooling because they are not happy with the public school system. Do these new public models represent a middle ground, and a way of bringing children back to public schools?

6. Some people have described public school home-learner programs as revenue generators for school districts. What do you think of that statement?

7. Parents may be hesitant about their abilities to teach, and about being perceived by some relatives and friends as unqualified to teach. Do public school’s home-learners programs offer legitimacy to homeschooling?

8. By enrolling with a public school program, as opposed to registering, parents accept that their child’s education will be overseen, assessed and evaluated by a member of the B.C. College of Teachers, comply with provincial curriculum, and receive regular reports. Are these requirements a threat to parental autonomy?

9. How is the public school program you are involved in different from homeschooling without the assistance of any school personnel?

10. What would you like people to know about why you have chosen to homeschool?

11. If you could send one message to classroom teachers what would it be?

12. Is there anything else that you had wanted to discuss that I have not asked about?

While being actively involved in the discussion I learned to limit my observations and opinions in order to not unduly influence the conversation. I requested permission to tape record conversations, so I would be able to concentrate on what was being said and
to ask clarifying questions if necessary. Dick recommends taking key-word notes during
the interview and converting them to themes afterwards. However I did not do any
writing, and preferred to focus my attention on listening to parents and probing with
clarifying questions. Glaser recommends not using tape recordings or taking notes in
order to encourage a more open discussion, however I felt it important to have transcripts
in order to compare specific interview comments and to provide a full accounting of the
conversation.

**Ethical Considerations**

Before proceeding with interviews I received ethics approval from the university
to conduct interviews (see appendix A). Due to the sensitivity of certain information,
interviewees were assigned a number rather than using their real names in order to ensure
anonymity. Also, due to the fact that certain comments about public schools and publicly
run homeschooling programs indicated a level of avoidance of regulations, I have chosen
not to specifically identify the programs involved in order to protect the identity of
parents and those responsible for those programs. Since I have not interviewed
employees of these programs in order for them to tell their story, it would be improper to
present only one side of the argument while critiquing specific programs. The purpose of
this study is to tell the stories of British Columbian homeschooling parents, not the
stories of the staff running the programs.8

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8 Larry Kuehn, Director of Research and Technology of the British Columbia Teachers Federation
recommends further research be conducted on the working conditions of teachers employed by school
districts. For more information see also Naylor, Charlie, *What Do British Columbia’s teachers consider to be*
the *most significant aspect of workload and stress in their work*, BCTF Research Report, Section III,
2001, WLC-03, October, 2001
Certain people, including interviewees and others, were hesitant to share their opinions about homeschooling, as they felt their identification could adversely affect their child’s on-going relationship with staff. Being aware of some homeschooler’s hesitancy to participate in research I determined that by allowing parents to remain anonymous I would get more honest opinions of their concerns, criticisms and motivations.

By using a small sample of parents to gather qualitative data, I have been able to sketch a general picture of the experiences of these six families. A fault of this methodology remains the size of the sample, however the issues commonly discussed by unrelated families were generally consistent. Grounded Theory hopefully allows the voices of the parents to become the thesis/story.
The Changing Face of DEL

Students have been using distance education options for over 80 years in British Columbia, since a lighthouse-keeper's request for elementary school courses in 1919\(^9\). Before the electronic delivery of these programs they were commonly known as correspondence courses and were paper based and typically completed through the use of the postal system. Begun in post-war 1919 Victoria as the Correspondence Branch of the Ministry of Education, these courses served the needs of rural British Columbians such as students on trap lines, students at lighthouses or on remote properties. Students covered the same materials as they would in a classroom, however they did so at their own pace from home.

There were many reasons why people chose correspondence courses over attending regular classrooms. Adults wanting to complete high school may have preferred doing so independently at home. Student athletes or performers may have needed a more flexible approach that allowed them to pursue their goals. Students who were traveling abroad could remain connected to the curriculum of their province. Still other students found that the regular school system did not meet their particular needs for many different reasons and that correspondence courses represented a preferred option.

Between 1984 and 1990 the British Columbia Ministry of Education created nine regional distance education schools. Their shared mandate was to deliver Ministry of

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\(^9\) Mugridge, D. & Kaufman, D. *Distance Education In Canada*. Croom Helm Ltd. Kent, UK, 1986. pg.194.
Education approved curriculum, via Ministry of Education, and locally developed curriculum resources material designed specifically for independent distance learners.\textsuperscript{10}

The first Distributed Electronic Learning (DEL) program run by a specific school district was the Nechako Electronic Busing Program (commonly known as E-Bus) which was started by the Nechako Lakes School District #91. In 1993 this pilot program enrolled students from around the province. Established public programs such as Nechako E-Bus and The Phoenix Program (School District #51), Boundary are two of the better-known programs. These district-run programs have hundreds of clients.

Both of these districts use a computer program called \textit{SuccessMaker}, a comprehensive K-8 educational curriculum software program designed by Computer Curriculum Corporation. Research on use of the Successmaker program has focused on its use within public schools as an addition to regular classroom instruction. When combined with classroom instruction it has improved student test scores and seen positively by teachers. (Powell, 2003; Miller, 1999; Mills, & Ragan, 1998, p.8) Mills and Ragan addressed the misconception that programs like Successmaker run themselves and warned that “by simply placing learners with computers does not ensure that they will grasp the underlying structure of important ideas and concepts”\textsuperscript{11} Effective teaching practices and teacher direction were needed for computer models to prove effective.

When students who had been receiving education at home enrolled with E-bus they were no longer considered to be \textit{homeschoolers}. Rather they were public school students who were \textit{schooled at home}. This change of wording would lead to huge

\textsuperscript{10} \url{http://www.k12connect.ca/html/history.htm} This is part of the BC Distance Education School website
financial advantages for districts having programs for home learners. If a student is homeschooled, the district they register with is entitled to receive only $250. If enrolled as a *schooled at home student*, that district is entitled to receive over $5500.

Since 1995 the nine regional distance education schools, along with the Ministry of Education and the Open Learning Agency have been working to develop an electronically deliverable version of their programs.

Initially there was a focus on developing electronic delivery of the grade 11 and 12 programs. Since 1997, the nine distance education schools have expanded their focus to include Kindergarten to grade 10.

Examples of pilot projects include “North Island Distance Education School (NIDES) which developed a project called NIDES On-line which used technology to enhance student learning at the elementary level. South Island Distance Education School (SIDES) purchased copies of Successmaker and piloted a model of putting computers in students' homes with a learning platform and a computer guided instruction model directed by SIDES teachers.”

With the growth of Internet use and access to computers, the pilot programs quickly expanded. All of these initiatives have culminated in the creation of CoNNect, the enhanced distance education program for students from Kindergarten to Grade 12. CoNNect was implemented at three distance education schools the pilot year (1997/1998) and was ready for full implementation at all nine distance education schools in the 1998/99 school year. During the pilot year some resource materials [were] produced and

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12 [http://www.k12connect.ca/html/history.htm](http://www.k12connect.ca/html/history.htm)
the technologies tested so that the program [was] ready for full roll out. For the 2001/2002 school year, enrollments in CoNNect remained capped by the Ministry of Education at 1074 full time enrolled (fte) students. For the 2002-2003 school year the enrollment cap was removed.\textsuperscript{13}

In July of 2002 the B.C Ministry of Education confirmed that six independent schools had been approved to offer Distributed Electronic Learning (DEL) programs. There was to be a total cap of 500 enrolled students to be distributed evenly amongst the six independent schools. By October of 2002 one of the schools had withdrawn from the two-year pilot program. The remaining five schools divided up the 500 students.

Enrolled Independent School Distributed Electronic Learning (DEL) was a two-year pilot program that commenced in September, 2002.\textsuperscript{14} "The independent school/authority is responsible for the educational program of a student enrolled in the school, even when the student is completing the program at home." Independent schools/authorities are to ensure that their programs are in compliance with the Independent School Act. There are no prohibitions regarding programs being of a religious nature in the Independent School Act (other than the parameters established in the Independent School Act Schedule, section 1). In addition, independent school DEL programs must meet the criteria established in the Independent School Provincial Distributed Electronic Learning (DEL) Program Standards.

Approved Group 1 independent schools received a grant of $2,654 (50\% of the public school rate) for each full-time enrolled DEL student.

\textsuperscript{13} http://www.k12connect.ca/html/history.htm
\textsuperscript{14} Ministry of Education, Ministry of Independent Schools Act, 2004
In 2003 there were five (5) approved pilot DEL schools in British Columbia: Anchor Academy, Traditional Learning Academy, Kelowna Christian School, Wondertree Learning Centre and Christian Home E-School. The public, Francophone or distance education school is responsible for the educational program of a student enrolled in their school, even when the student is completing the program at home. Public schools must ensure that their programs are in compliance with the School Act, which states, “All schools must be conducted on strictly secular and non-sectarian principles” and that “no religious dogma or creed is to be taught in a school” (School Act, section 76). Learning resources that support educational programs must be selected from either the Ministry’s List of Recommended Learning Resources or through a local process approved by the school district. In addition, public school DEL programs must meet the criteria established in the Public School Distance and Electronic Learning Policy.

Public schools received a grant of $5 308 for each full-time enrolled DEL student in 2002.\textsuperscript{15}

The year 2003 saw dramatic shifts in the funding of students participating in distance education in British Columbia; funding was set by the ministry at a level identical to that received by school districts for the students they taught in classrooms. The implications of this funding shift are dramatic. The Operating Grants Manual from the ministry in 2002-2003 said, “The students in Distributed Electronic Learning (DEL) are now funded the same way as regular school-age students.”\textsuperscript{16} At the same time parents were allowed to enroll with any program anywhere in the province, not just their local

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid

\textsuperscript{16} Kuehn, Larry British Columbia Teachers Federation Research Report, Developments with Distributed Learning Section XII, 2002-EI-03 published by BCTF. Pg 2.
school district. Districts and Distance Education Schools now competed for students. Previously the funding had been at 50% of a full time enrolled student. With this legislated change homeschooled children doubled in value for districts.

Provisions of Bill 34 allowed parental choice of school districts. This meant that any district could offer its program to students from anywhere in the province. After years of attempts at multi-district, cooperative ways of developing curriculum, a phase of competition became the norm. Ken Robertson, outgoing Principal for Nechako E-Bus concluded a document and letter to parents explaining some of the new program requirements designed to tighten up compliance with ministry guidelines in preparation for an audit with the following words: “I am sure everyone will have a more money for me desire and wish them well as the carcass gets carved up.”¹⁷

The British Columbia Teacher’s Federation (BCTF) identified a key element regarding DEL programs, stating that “creating competition between programs-as created in the new ministry policy- is not an appropriate direction to take.”¹⁸

Districts were provided with an opportunity to offer an alternative educational service, and hopefully enroll enough interested parents to provide a windfall of funding. Every 100 students enrolled meant over half a million dollars more to cash-strapped districts. Mike Suddaby, district superintendent for District 42(Maple Ridge) is modeling his districts program after a “250-student program located at Silverdale in Mission, which employs five full-time instructors.”¹⁹

¹⁷ www.e-bus.com/announcementandletter.htm letter titled: Ministry announcement of changes that will affect our program and our letter of response dated 6/20/2003
¹⁸ Kuehn, Larry, BCTF Research Report, Sec. XII, 2003-EI-02 Distributed Learning In B.C., 2002-03 p.3.
¹⁹ Riley, Nicholas, Better tracking of home schoolers, new program proposed, Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows Times, Sept. 03, 2002.
presumably cost districts less than staffing, heating, and servicing 8-10 classrooms to
teach the same number of students. Several parents talked about how the districts were
quite up front about offering the homeschooling programs as a way of raising necessary
money for their districts. However, the point was also made that with shrinking
enrolments in some districts, closing schools and vacant classrooms in others, that a
program that served more children and brought money to the district as a whole was a
win-win situation. Homeschooling parents get assessments, activities, field trips,
photocopied material and the counsel of a certified member of the B.C. College of
Teachers. The school districts developed a way of providing their version of a
homeschooling program, staffing it accordingly, and receiving increased revenue.

Gold Trail School District (#74) gained unwanted notoriety in 2001-2002 when
an audit of their homeschooling program showed that the district was receiving full
funding for over 600 homeschooled children registered with them, as if they were
students attending a regular public school. However, Gold Trail was providing one
teacher to oversee all homeschoolers; very little in the way of educational programming,
no teacher support, and was providing funding of up to $500 for parents to buy learning
resources of their own selection. Also, Gold Trail was leaving the parents responsible for
the development, teaching, testing and curriculum choice of their particular program,
which included some resources of a religious nature. Based on use of postal code data it
was discovered that Gold Trail was registering students from outside of their area. An
audit by the Ministry of Education determined that 648 students were receiving a home-
school program and do not qualify for full funding under section 108 of the School Act.
The Ministry of Education set a de facto fine by reducing grant money to the Gold Trail district by $2,549,063.

The end result of the Gold Trail incident was the tightening up of pilot project standards for both independent schools and public school districts in order to ensure greater clarity of responsibilities and compliance with school laws. The Office of the Inspector of Independent Schools outlined ministerial expectations in Independent Schools Distributed Electronic Learning (DEL) Pilot Project Standards: DOC 08/13/2003 (Appendix B)

Growth of Homeschooling

Historically in North America the home was the only option available to most families for educating their young. The home, the workshop and the field were the primary places that one generation passed on knowledge to the next. Apprenticeship was a common form of education. In Upper Canada, education remained informal until laws were passed between 1841 and 1871 establishing provincial school systems. Increasingly education of the young was placed in the hands of professionals and eventually home education was viewed as inferior. Social and economic factors, particular to British Columbia, but influenced by British North America were seen as essential reasons why the State needed to provide free, non-sectarian education to British Columbians.

There were limited major changes in education until the 1960s. Civil Rights activists in the United States and Anti-war activists were advocating for major social

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20 Nicol, p.5
changes. This was a period that saw a questioning of the entire structure and function of schooling. The institutions of schooling were often portrayed as not serving the individual needs and styles of children. Holt (1969), Illich (1971) and Neill (1960) presented alternative criticisms and models of education that encouraged parents to both question existing systems and move away from traditional models of public schooling. In this atmosphere of strong criticism, homeschooling was one of many experimental approaches. During the 1970’s and 1980’s many legal rights were established allowing homeschoolers the right to educate their children at home. In the United States in 1980 homeschooling was illegal in 30 states. By 1993 it was legal in all 50 states. Different states have different degrees of regulations. Some requiring parents to merely inform local authorities of their desire to homeschool, others requiring standardized testing and that homeschooling parents be certified teachers. Section 21 (2) of the Ontario Education Act stated that children of school age could be excused from compulsory attendance in a public school if the child was receiving satisfactory instruction, at home, or elsewhere. The difficulty lies in defining satisfactory instruction. Section 24 (2) of the Ontario Education Act (1974) says that when the parent judges that instruction to be satisfactory and the local school attendance counselor is of the opinion that it is not, then an inquiry can be requested. The Provincial School Attendance Counselor (PSAC) could declare that a child was excused, or not excused from compulsory attendance at a public school. Many legal rights were established allowing homeschoolers the right to educate their children at home. In 1981, a memorandum from K.D. Johnson, Provincial School Attendance Counselor, established criteria defining satisfactory learning by a child. In British Columbia, the School Act demands children have an educational program, but
does not define that program. A registered home-schooled student is one who is
registered under section 13 of The School Act, and whose parents can maintain control
and overall guidance of the curriculum. Bill 67(1989) is cited by the Home School Legal
Defense Association of Canada as being a model for all of North America.

In 1987 a Royal Commission toured British Columbia to explore public opinions
about education in the province. This commission tour was the genesis for the founding
of the British Columbia Home Learners Association (BCHLA), which made several
presentations to the commission.

Nicol cites Llewellyn (1991, p.10) as suggesting many in the past saw
homeschooling as “fundamentalist Christian”, subversive, or illegitimate. Lange (1999)
identified five major categories for why parents in Minnesota chose homeschooling.
These were educational philosophy, special needs of the child, school climate, family
lifestyle and parenting philosophy, and religion and ethics.

Van Galen (1991) distinguishes parents motivated to homeschool as being either
ideologues or pedagogues. Ideologues were motivated by the content in school, whereas
pedagogues were concerned with the methods of teaching.

The perception of schools as unsafe places has also played a role in the increase in
homeschooling’s popularity (Fager & Brewster, 2000). Violent incidents like those at
Columbine High School, in Littleton, Colorado in 1999, in which students were murdered
by heavily armed, mentally deranged students who wandered the hallways of their school
killing twelve students and one teacher, have served to heighten the fears of parents.
Eight days later in W.R. Myers High School in Taber, Alberta a copycat murderer of 14
years of age shot and killed a student and injured another. With massive media coverage of the events showing students jumping from buildings, surveillance video of armed students, screaming, terrified parents and students, and SWAT teams surrounding public schools it is little wonder that parents retreat to the safe confines of home. Kozlowski (1999) reported that shielding children from adverse social factors such as violence and bullying was one of the most frequent reasons cited by superintendents in Alabama for why they believed parents chose homeschooling. McDowell (2000) analyzed the effects of incidents of violence at schools on homeschooling. She determined that negative factors of public schools multiplied the number of parents choosing homeschooling. Perception is not necessarily reality. Gordon, G.W. (2001) found that in British Columbia “there is no question that the perception of the amount of violence in both society and in our schools is over-estimated.”

Holt (1923 –1985), who has written extensively on ‘unschooling’, ‘deschooling’, ‘homeschooling’, has had, and continues to have, a large impact on the trend toward homeschooling. In his book How Children Fail (Pitman, New York, 1964) Holt suggests that the very structures of present schools make it difficult for children to make personal meaning of their world. Holt was an advocate for the progressive school reform movement. Following attempts to reform the school system from within, Holt eventually rejected schooling and began advocating unschooling of children by parents at home. Unschooling was the genesis of the modern homeschooling movement.

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Discontent with the public school system is a common thread of motivation for homeschooling. Nicol (1993) suggests that traditional public school teaching methods are seen as emotionally and intellectually stifling by some parents who choose the homeschooling option. Welner (2002) divides homeschoolers into two distinct groups; civic-minded homeschoolers who, despite personally not choosing public schools, support the need for strong public schools in order to ensure a democratic society; and autonomy-minded homeschoolers who question government's proper role in society, and see non-Christian influences as part of a public school system they see as fundamentally flawed and incapable of serving their views and moral needs and values of their children. An important shift has occurred in the homeschooling movement. Today, homeschooling is being considered a more legitimate option than in the past. Parents view homeschooling as merely one educational option among many, rather than a radical alternative to contemporary public schooling. This would suggest that homeschooling is appealing to a larger, more mainstream segment of the population than in the past. Parents are more interested in trying to do what is best for their children by using their educational choices to make deliberate political statements about parental rights in education. If recent trends continue, homeschooling will likely increase in popularity. In the United States in 1985 there were 50 000 children homeschooled. By 2001 that number had jumped to 1.5 million students. Some researchers in the United States suggest an annual growth rate of 15%. In Canada in 1994 between 15 000 and 60 000

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24 Lange, Cheryl M. Parents’ Reasons for Transfer and the Implications for Educational Policy Research Report #29 National Center on Educational Outcomes, Minneapolis, MN, 1999
children were estimated to be homeschooling. In 2001 an estimated 80 000 children were homeschooled in Canada.

The number of students registered as homeschoolers with the BC Ministry of Education in 1989 was 1 695 students. In 1999 that number had climbed to 4 643 students. Due to the changing manner in which homeschoolers are counted it is difficult to get an accurate figure of how many people are choosing this option in Canada.

Registration is mandatory in British Columbia, though public school programs are required to enroll students to receive full funding. Quebec, however, does not keep any statistics on homeschoolers.

In British Columbia the terms registered and enrolled are used to differentiate between those that homeschool with the assistance of an institution and those that teach their children at home. Simon Hersey, a lawyer with the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) refers to enrolling with a public school homeschooling program as a poison pill. HSLDA notes that B.C. Ministry has removed restrictions on DEL enrollments. "HSLDA is very concerned about this trend and sees this as a way for the government to bring the secular public system into home school families." (HSLDA, 2002, p.1.)

The most common reason cited for homeschooling is based on spiritual or religious views (Lange, 1999) This demand for a religious education is not accessible through the public school system due to the requirement that all material must avoid religious dogma and be

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non-sectarian. The demand among homeschoolers for a religious content to schooling in BC may be seen in the enrollment numbers of public versus independent schools between 1989 and 2001. Public school pilot homeschool programs saw a steady decline in enrollment from a high of 958 students in 1990/91 to a low of 311 students in 2001/02. During the same time independent schools such as Anchor Academy, Traditional Learning Academy, Kelowna Christian School, Wondertree Learning Centre and Christian Home E-School saw their numbers increase from 925 homeschooling students in 1989 to 3351 students in 2001/02. These schools allowed parents to include religious components as part of their educational programs. “Those homeschoolers who educate their children at home for religious reasons often object to the secular bias of public schools. By keeping their children at home, they seek to provide a religious education free from the influences of secularism and pop culture. These homeschoolers wish to avoid the public school at all costs.”

Nicol (1993) states:

“Homeschoolers disdain the fact that homeschooling students who register for even one correspondence course are no longer considered homeschooled. Parents argue that, on paper, it suggests that another homeschooler has returned to the public system. They further argue that the implications are worth pondering. “When the goal posts are moved, the game changes significantly.”

One implication of the mainstreaming of homeschooling is better cooperation between schools and the home. In the past, homeschoolers preferred to have little or no contact with school officials. Most contact was initiated by the schools and most of the efforts were aimed at trying to get children back into the school system. As a new generation of parents begins homeschooling they may demand more interaction and

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29 Nicol, p. 16
cooperation from schools. Parents may begin to initiate contact and demand that schools work with and support them in their efforts to educate their children at home.

School officials may also be more amenable to cooperation with homeschoolers because they will realize that homeschooling is not a wholesale rejection of the public education system. Homeschooling is now viewed by some parents as an alternative and possibly a complementary educational option. This increased contact may lead to a blurring of boundaries between homeschooled and schooled children and the boundaries between home and school. Groover, and Endsley, (1988) summarized implications for educational administrators. “Rather than regarding the study of homeschoolers as irrelevant for educational practice, early childhood educators and other educational specialists might consider this movement as another social indicator of the health of our schools, and the practices of homeschooling parents and the outcomes for their children as providing clues for ways to make necessary educational reform” (cited in Lange, p.20) This study may add further voice to the call for change in the manner in which we teach our children.

Ways and Styles of Learning

Many parents felt that their child’s learning style was not served well by public schooling. A common criticism of the public school system’s regular classroom teaching was that it was often limited in its ability to offer a diverse range of ways children could learn and show their learning. Two sets of parents argued that along with class-size the actual site and physical nature and teaching traditions of public schools does not allow children to demonstrate success as well as can be done through homeschooling. One
parent stating that schools focused on two primary intelligences (logical/mathematical and verbal/linguistic), even though there were eight different learning styles. Not accommodating children with strong musical and/or athletic strengths was seen as a negative feature of public schools by four of the six interviewees.

Howard Gardner, an education professor at Harvard, wrote the seminal book *Frame of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, in 1983. Gardner argues that many types of intelligence are hard-wired in the brain. Essentially, Multiple Intelligences theory suggests that all people learn in different ways, and all people have a variety of preferred ways of interacting with their world. Gardner (1983) identified seven learning styles, later adding an eighth. His categories of learning styles are verbal/linguistic, logical/mathematical, visual/spatial, musical/rhythmic, bodily/kinesthetic, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and the more recently added naturalist style. According to Spencer Kagan & Miguel Kagan, (1998) famous people personifying this same list in the same order include William Shakespeare for verbal/linguistic, Albert Einstein for logical/mathematical, Georgia O'Keeffe representing excellence in the visual/spatial realm, Louis Armstrong is chosen to demonstrate musical/rhythmic greatness, Charlie Chaplin and Michael Jordan are famous examples of people with strong bodily/kinesthetic talents, St. Thomas Aquinas and Mahatma Gandhi are celebrated as examples of intrapersonal intelligence, while Mother Teresa and John F. Kennedy represent interpersonal intelligence. Finally Charles Darwin and Jane Goodall represent the intelligence of the naturalist category.

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Multiple Intelligences theory has challenged the traditional measure of intelligence known as the IQ test (Intelligence Quotient) based on oral or written testing. Those who were strong at linguistics, math and logic ranked high on the IQ scale and those with other skills such as musical or athletic talent may have scored poorly. Laurel Schmidt, an educational consultant and advocate of MI theory, wrote, “Many schools focus so intently on producing good readers and mathematicians that they routinely dismiss other intelligences”32 “Schools have not evolved”, said one parent, arguing that modern brain research is rarely used by modern teachers. “If you are not good at reading, writing and arithmetic, you are seen as a failure.”

That public schools may still teach towards achievement on IQ-type tests is one area of tension between homeschoolers and school boards. One problem with implementing MI theory in regular classrooms is that schools are designed for groups, not individuals, and catering to the individual learning styles of 30 different students would be logistically difficult. Indeed marking, ranking and report cards were an area mentioned as concerns by most parents spoken to. One parent stated his belief that schools focused much too heavily on achievement testing.33 “Schools spend months preparing students for these tests, sometimes just to make the administrator look good.” Others mentioned teaching to the test as not what they wished to see. “What are they having to teach less of in order to practice for these tests?” was the concern of one parent.

33 The Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) test is administered across the province of British Columbia to all grade 4, 7 enrolled elementary school students. The marks are tabulated by the Fraser Institute annually and published widely throughout British Columbia media in a ranking from highest overall scores to lowest. The FSA, although always mentioned as only one tool of many to assess school strengths, is widely used to rank schools and encourage school choice by parents.
One parent said that her son did very poorly on achievement tests because he was not a verbal/linguistic, nor a logical/mathematical learner. She wished that elementary schools would tailor more of their teachings to kinesthetic learners, and she was extremely disappointed in the way that her child's public school had cut music education. She argued that modern brain research clearly shows that physical activity and learning of music increases the electrical stimulation and synapse-firing rate within the brain\(^{34}\).

Two parents mentioned the need for more regular physical activity in the schools. One parent saying that despite ministerial recommendations for daily physical education, her child had only received two physical education classes per week.\(^{35}\) All but one parent interviewed listed music lessons as part of their children's homeschooling. This suggests that public schools are not meeting the needs of parents whose children may have learning styles, aptitudes and strengths not catered to by traditional instructional methods that focus on a verbal/linguistic and logical/mathematical pedagogy. The use of portfolio assessments by homeschooling programs was listed as a common assessment format by parents and suggests openness on the part of school districts to encourage different demonstrations of learning styles. Parental motivations are to provide a positive experience for their children, and when children did not appear to be succeeding at school parents saw this esteem issue to be potentially damaging and homeschool became the preferred option. Discussions about children who "learned differently", "Weren't like

\(^{34}\) For more on this see an excellent website on brain research designed for educators at http://members.shaw.ca/priscillatheroux/brain.html

\(^{35}\) As a classroom teacher I would concur with this, as typically I have two slots per week during which time I can use the school gymnasium. This does not mean that daily physical activity is not happening outside of these times, as many teachers include additional games, runs and outdoor activities as part of their daily plan. Action Schools is a ministry initiative that promotes daily physical activities in BC classes. These include activities that can be done in class that promote cardiovascular as well as bone and muscle development. Further research could prove valuable in determining the actual amount of daily activities that individual teachers are doing relative to the official amount shown on physical education schedules.
other kids”, “danced to a different drum”, showed parents keen awareness that their child “did not fit in.” A teacher who worked with homeschooling parents suggested, in a conversation, that some of the parents she worked with were perhaps afraid to expose their children to the competitive aspects of marking and grading.

Socialization

The issue of socialization is a controversial topic both among homeschoolers and their critics. It is often the first thing mentioned in conversations with teachers, parents and the general public when discussing homeschooling. The research critical of homeschooling for reasons of limited socialization is sparse, whereas articles, books and Internet sites writing about the positive socialization aspects of homeschooling number in the hundreds. Virtually every book and Internet site written about homeschooling deals with the question of socialization (Andrew, 2000) Lubienski, (2000) Medlin, (2000) Moore, (1986) 

Parents of homeschoolers interviewed almost always reacted quite forcefully and sometimes with apparent frustration at the misunderstandings around what is meant by socialization. As an organized group homeschoolers have helped focus research efforts on responding to the suggestion that they are not socializing their children properly. By saying that a child is not socialized, the implication is that the parents themselves have not allowed their children the opportunity to grow up able to get along with others; that

the child will be somehow disabled socially by their parent’s decision. The sense of being unfairly and incorrectly judged by others is strong amongst homeschoolers regarding the issue of socialization.

Following several interviews I began to notice a commonality among parents regarding discussing this subject. Comments such as “We don’t talk to people about that anymore”, “I do not try to convince anyone about what we are doing.” or “Socializing is not something I have to defend to anyone.” were common. Parents did not want to justify themselves to others and two families spoke of two types of contact they had with others. There were people who were familiar with homeschooling and those that did not know anything about it. Those that were not part of their homeschooling circle of friends and acquaintances were often not even aware the families taught their own children. One parent saying “They did not want to get into [an argument over] the subject with people.”

The prime argument against homeschooling for many years has been that removing children from the school system does not allow them to be properly socialized; in order to succeed in life children must learn to work with and get along with their peers. Schools, the argument goes, offer the best opportunity for children to interact with their peers and learn the necessary social skills that come with being at a school. “School has been made responsible for an expanding range of socializing activities that previously were considered the proper roles of other social institutions, such as the family”(Medlin, 2000, p.108.)

Schools are also viewed as the best place for children of many cultures and backgrounds to get to know one another. Educational psychologists in particular have

warned that “Homeschooling shelters children from society...but traditional schools
ensure that children will grow up to be “complete people” by teaching key social skills
such as cooperation, respect for others, and self-control.” (Medlin, p.108) Mayberry
interviewed school district superintendents and reported that over 90% believed that
home-schooled children did not receive adequate socialization experiences.38

The Home School Legal Defense Association of Canada (HSLDACanada,2002)
refers to socialization as perhaps the most misunderstood aspect of home schooling. “It is
the positive aspects of socialization through the home that attracts many families to this
lifestyle.”39 Mayberry and Knowles (1989) wrote that negative socialization [at school]
concerned many homeschooling parents. Unsupervised times where teasing, exclusion
and other negative social reactions occurred, risked damaging children’s self-esteem.
Arai, of Wilfred Laurier University (2000) reported that parents concerned with negative
socialization weighed the many positive aspects of class time, but decided “the only way
to preserve their children’s self-concept and confidence was through home schooling.”40

Alex (1994) reported that children who were schooled at home gained the
necessary skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to function in society at a rate similar to
that of conventionally schooled children.41

Oaks, CA; Corwin, 1995.
39 Questions & Answers About Home Schooling, pamphlet published by Home School Legal Defence
Association of Canada, Medicine Hat, Alberta, undated, (+/- 2001) p. 2 See also Alex, Patrick K. Home
Schooling, Socialization and Creativity in Children, article in ERIC Apr. 1994 #367 040
Toronto, 2000. p205
41 Alex, Patrick K. Home Schooling, Socialization and Creativity in Children, article in ERIC Apr. 1994
#367 040
Homeschooling parents I interviewed referred to the socialization question as 'a crock', 'a red herring', 'a load of crap', and parents talked about it with a tone of frustration, as if they had heard the argument endlessly, and were tired of the suggestion that their children were not properly socialized.

In the mid 1990’s Ray conducted a large scale survey of 808 homeschooling parents representing 2 594 children across Canada. He showed that socially, homeschooling children participated in a wide variety of activities involving other children. 60% were engaged in group sports, 45% took classes with students outside the home, 31% were doing volunteer work with people, 82% participated in Sunday school, 6% took dance classes, 5% were involved in 4-H, and 93% of parents reported that their children engaged in play activities with people outside of the home. 42

Most parents spoke of the type of socialization that went on at school as one of the reasons they did not have their children in school. Arai (2000) lists four major motivations for homeschooling; 1) Developing positive family unity, 2) following an alternative lifestyle that resists consumerist and materialist influences within schools, 3) parents removing children due to negative personal memories of schooling, and 4) parent’s assertions that they have a right and responsibility to protect children from harmful influences. 43 Children were “more likely, at school, to be influenced by the majority, than to be independent.”

One parent spoke of her children coming home from school having learned swear words from their peers. A report from Cornell University “found that children who spend

42 Ray, Brian D. Homeschooling In Canada. Education Canada, Spring 2001. Vol. 41, Iss. 1; p. 30
43 Arai, p. 206
more time with their peers than with their parents generally become dependant on those peers and parental influence is quickly lost."44.

Bullying was often mentioned as a common occurrence in schools and a type of socialization that was normal at school. Arai (2000) reported that negative socialization was a concern for a majority of parents homeschooling for pedagogical reasons. "These parents believed that the incessant teasing, pranks, and exclusionary behaviour, especially during unsupervised time (e.g., recess, lunch hour, and after school) could be extremely damaging to their children’s sense of self."45 Certainly among interviewees there were anecdotal reports of children being bullied, pressured, or teased. One couple in particular were concerned about the negative influences of consumerism through their school. Their child, they believed, was being exposed to highly competitive social ranking that was associated with brand name clothes, purchasing of expensive gifts and outdoing one another on the lavishness of birthday parties. This, combined with a view of other parents as activists who pushed their children towards music, dance, art and being elected to student council positions, created a negative image of schooling for these parents. "Keeping up with the Jones’", and "establishing a pecking order" were influences these parents wanted to keep their children from. With one family in particular, avoiding consumerism and class status was one of the primary motivations expressed for choosing to homeschool.

Large class size was a common criticism of public schools. One parent referred to this as unnatural socializing and parents questioned whether same aged peer grouping

44 Questions and Answers, p.2.
was a good way to socialize children. Was it natural for a child to spend 12 years of their life with 30 people of the same age? One parent argued that grade-aged grouping was in fact unsocial, and that homeschooling children probably socialized with a broader range of people than schooled children. This homeschooling trait of associating with different aged people may produce more socially mature people; as Medlin states, “because they are not peer-grouped in school, home-schooled children learn to get along with a variety of people, making them socially mature and able to adjust to new and challenging situations.”

Smedley suggests that home-schooled children may be “better socialized” than their schooled peers and suggested that this may be because families “more accurately mirror the outside society” than do traditional schools. One parent commented: “What teacher wouldn’t want a class size of three or four children? Imagine all you could get done as a teacher if the ratio was that low. Children would love it, and imagine how good the teachers would feel about their job!” In public school situations these class-sizes of three or four are only seen in Learning Assistance classes, and among special education teachers who pull children out of large classes for several hours a week to focus on their individual needs. Few children in the public school system receive this small group attention, and following Kindergarten to grade three, where some districts limit enrolment; children may face increasing class sizes of over 30 students.

One of the problems with research on socialization is agreeing on just what socialization means. Medlin suggests the following questions to better define the particulars of socialization: Do homeschooled children participate in the daily routines of their communities? Are home schooled children acquiring the rules of behavior and

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46 Medlin, p.119
systems of beliefs and attitudes they need, and can home schooled children function effectively as members of society?\textsuperscript{48}

Regarding whether homeschool children participate in daily routines of their communities, Medlin summarizes research on the subject by concluding, “research documents quite clearly that home-schooled children are very much engaged in the social routines of their communities”. He suggests that due to more flexible scheduling of homeschooling families that they may indeed participate more in extra curricular activities than children attending traditional schools.\textsuperscript{49} Medlin concludes that homeschool children “are learning rules for appropriate social behavior and forming healthy attitudes toward themselves” and that “their social behavior and self-esteem are certainly no worse than those of children attending conventional schools and are probably better”.\textsuperscript{50} As for whether homeschoolers can function as effective members of society, Medlin concludes that because research in homeschooling is still in its infancy that there is little research on long-term effects of homeschooling. He cited one research project (Galloway, 1998; Galloway & Sutton, 1997) that tracked 60 homeschooled and non-homeschooled students in college. She evaluated 63 indicators of college performance, grouped into five categories: academic, cognitive, social, spiritual, and psychomotor. For 42 of the 63 measures, homeschoolers came in first, and Galloway(1998) concluded that since many of these indicators involved positions of leadership, “that homeschool students were readily recognized for their leadership.”\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{48} Medlin, p.113  
\textsuperscript{49} Medlin, p.113  
\textsuperscript{50} Medlin, p.116  
\textsuperscript{51} Medlin, p.117
John Holt, one of the early leaders and proponents of homeschooling in the United States, wrote many articles on the subject of socialization in school. His answer to the question: If children are taught at home, won't they miss the valuable social life of the school? is categorical. "If there were no other reason for wanting to keep kids out of school", he writes, "the social life would be reason enough. In all but a very few of the schools I have taught in, visited, or know anything about, the social life of the children is mean-spirited, competitive, exclusive, status-seeking, snobbish, full of talk about who went to whose birthday party and who got-what Christmas presents and who got how many Valentine cards and who is talking to so-and-so and who is not. Even in the first grade, classes soon divide into leaders (energetic and - often deservedly - popular kids), their bands of followers, and other outsiders who are pointedly excluded from these groups."52

Poor classroom management, and thus the individual management style of particular teachers, was mentioned as a negative form of socialization by several parents during interviews. Descriptions of chaotic, unruly classrooms where teachers had little control and authority over students led several parents to homeschool. One couple removed their child after unsuccessfuely arguing to have the child placed into a different classroom due to their perceptions of the teacher's inability to properly run the classroom. "Children were running around, screaming, and interrupting the learning of others without any consequences," said one parent. Another parent stating simply, "there are good teachers and bad teachers." When pressed to elaborate, this parent said that they had great respect for all teachers, and that it was a difficult job, but that some teachers simply

52 Holt John, Common Objections to Homeschooling. From www.naturalchild.com/common_objections/#6
had more structure and order in their teaching and that other teachers were less structured. They felt that their child definitely needed a structured classroom and that the child’s upcoming teacher would not be able to offer the structure they believed was necessary for their child. One parent said that her child would definitely be going back into public school for a certain grade “because I know the teacher and their style well and she is a fantastic teacher. One parent observed that some unstructured teachers are good teachers and that certain children could do better in that type of class, if it matched their learning style; just not her child. Louise Towill, a retired teacher and workshop presenter argues that classroom management is the number one factor in influencing children’s ability to learn in class\textsuperscript{53}. Rich Schmid, a retired principal and workshop presenter on positive classroom management puts it more bluntly: With good classroom management children learn more, without it, they don’t learn much at all\textsuperscript{54}.

Socialization will continue to be a topic of debate between advocates for homeschooling and those opposed to the practice, however in the literature there is overwhelming evidence that socialization, far from being a positive of public schools, is an aspect of school that many parents see negatively.

\textsuperscript{53} From a conversation with Louise Towill at a school professional development workshop on literacy in Surrey, July, 2004
\textsuperscript{54} From a conversation with Rich Schmid during a professional development workshop on classroom management in Surrey, June, 2005.
The Interviews

The discussions with parents of homeschoolers is the heart of this research. Interviewees were selected in various ways. Some were neighbours, children of neighbours and acquaintances. Some formal requests were made of local support groups and or associations in the hopes of providing a diverse selection.

Typically we would meet in the kitchen or living room of theirs or my home for forty-five minutes or more. Initially, I had hoped to meet with the parents without the children around so that we could have an uninterrupted discussion. Perhaps this is similar to a teaching practice of meeting with the parents of a child (Parent/Teacher interviews) and not including the child. This is a practice that as a teacher I have done, but prefer not to. Including the children in discussions about them makes sense, if they are to learn of their parent’s expectations and how they are “performing” at school. This attitude perhaps says more about me as a public school teacher and some of the habits I have taken to than as my role of parent and teacher of my own children.

It is an important motivation of this research to know that I, as the interviewer, do wish to homeschool my own children. I would let this be known to the parents I interviewed.

Much of my motivation is about spending the elusive “quality time” that people hope to share with their children. Like any parent I also hope to prepare my children to be their best. This I presume to be a universal belief. To exclude children from the
discussion would, in a sense, be against one of the underlying reasons why parents homeschool: to be with, and introduce children to the world as if they are mature, capable beings, able to participate with adults. With this awareness I proceeded with my questions. I was surprised to see that the children were able to keep themselves occupied and that there was little in the way of interruptions, and when they did occur, they were not disruptive to the conversations.

An unexpected realization I came to was how infrequently the television was used to keep the children occupied. Something that as a parent I am on occasion guilty of doing, was infrequent in the homes I went to. It is not the purpose of this research to compare homeschooled to classroom schooled children, but I believe it is significant that regardless of the times I did the interviews that the children were busy around the house either playing, reading or doing other activities, but never were they watching television. Very unscientific research that I have conducted with numerous classrooms suggests that classroom educated students have the television on in their homes for an average of five to six hours a day, with some children reporting upwards of 15 hours of having the television on daily.55 The statistic that American children spend an average of 39 minutes

55 This assignment is one I do every year with my students and we have students record both how long the television, or televisions, are on in their homes, and how many hours of television they themselves watch. Typically the children report actually watching television for roughly three or four hours a day. As the worldwide study by Unesco showed, children all over the world spend an average of 3 hours daily in front of the TV screen. That is at least 50 per cent more time spent with this medium than with any other out-of-school activity, like home-work, being with family or friends, or reading. The Second World Summit on Television for Children, held in London in March 1998, was told that watching TV is now the
a week having meaningful discussions with parents is one that would clearly not apply to homeschoolers.

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Interview questions and general comments

Each interview followed a format of the following questions. I have included some specific comments on answers to the questions.

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Could you describe the thoughts, discussions and debates you had when considering homeschooling?

Many parents expressed initial apprehension at the idea of homeschooling. Concerns ranged from whether homeschooling was legal, to whether they would be capable of providing the necessary learning conditions their children needed. Most parents knew of friends that were already homeschooling and went to local support groups to find out more information, or to district open houses.

The child’s readiness to learn in a school setting was often mentioned. Some parents said that the public school system, as well as pre-schools, appeared to push children towards reading and writing before children were ready to learn these skills. Some felt that this undue pressure and their child’s early experiences of failure through formal schooling were key factors in choosing to homeschool. Parental fear that their children were already learning to see themselves in a negative manner was common. Comments such as their child not ‘fitting in’, or not receiving individual attention for their style of learning were frequent. Several parents said that their child had a maturity level, and reading level, above that of their peers and that public classrooms were not challenging enough for their child. Parents described not wanting to send their child off to a one-size-fits-all classroom where their individuality would not be respected.

Homeschooling parents saw themselves as the best suited individuals to understand the particular habits, styles and strengths of their children, and conversely saw school teachers, however well meaning and skilled, as being less able to tap into their child’s potential.
Criticism of classroom learning was often focused on the apparent monotony and irrelevance of the curriculum, along with large class-size issues. Worksheets, repetitive activities, and “other children’s social concerns, or special needs” seem to convince many parents that classrooms were not positive places for their children to be. One parent summed up many opinions when she said that she herself remembered accepting boredom as just an inevitable part of schooling, and that she did not want to see her “child’s dreams and aspirations slowly snuffed out for the sake of conformity.” Many parents referred to their own negative experiences in classrooms as reasons for choosing to homeschool.

It was very common for parent to cite strong initial opposition to their idea of homeschooling, particularly from their own extended families. Questions about their ability to teach, about the value of socialization through school, and about causing long-term damage to the children due to isolation was common. On this question of extended family support it was often said how opposition to the idea was decreased when the parents explained that they were proceeding through a public school model and that they were working directly with a certified teacher.

Why did you, or did you not, choose to enroll in a public school program for homeschooling?

In explaining their choice of public school program, money was often mentioned as a factor in the decision. Several parents said they were embarrassed to admit this, but that having the ability to recoup one thousand dollars per child allowed them to provide more learning resources and opportunities for their children. Parents would keep receipts
and typically submitted them in January and June of each school year. This policy appears to be designed to discourage parents from exiting from programs before the full term.

Expenditures mentioned most often included books and general school supplies, fees for clubs, sports groups, music lessons, and admission costs related to field trips. Computer equipment and project specific materials such as science equipment, arts and crafts supplies, and magazine subscriptions were also mentioned. Several districts loaned fully loaded, internet-ready computers to children and recouped the cost from parent’s allowable deductions. Public schools sometimes arranged field trips and small group mini-lessons that often involved a fee.

When discussing their embarrassment at being motivated by refunds, parents mentioned that money was not the main motivation for homeschooling, that quality time with children, providing for their child’s individual needs and providing a high quality learning experience was. However, in several cases parents mentioned that a tight budget meant that without enrolling, that their children would have less opportunities.

Along with money, parents mentioned wanting to have access to their local school, particularly for sports, music and extra curricular activities. Parents also mentioned the importance of having a teacher to guide them through their child’s year.

The school homelearner programs also acted as a support group for parents. The school often hosted regular meetings, tutoring sessions and provided a place where parents could meet to share ideas, discuss concerns and get support from like-minded parents. One parent of a non-enrolled child complained that long established local
support groups were dwindling, "bleeding" in size, due to the emergence of public school
groups. This seeking out of support of fellow parents was an almost universal trait among
homeschoolers. A support group, whether formal and organized around monthly
meetings or informal and based on local community networks was seen as very valuable
for parents and for their children. Parents would talk about not feeling isolated and the
importance of their children meeting other homeschooling children to see that their
experience was not unique. Support groups were mentioned as a place where ideas and
phone numbers were exchanged and where parents reaffirmed their reasons for choosing
this alternative path.

*What appeals to you about the program you have enrolled in?*

The individual teacher with whom the parent communicated was often mentioned
as the primary reason for remaining with a program. When parents felt the teacher was
able to tailor their child's learning program to their child, they were more likely to remain
in the program. Several parents stated that the formal Ministry of Education requirements
were not always adhered to. Proof of learning was sometimes simply the parent saying
that a particular topic had been addressed, without any formal portfolio or documentation.
This was important for several parents, as they believed that learning was happening even
when it was not formally on paper or written up as a report. Parents seemed to appreciate
the flexibility of a program that allowed their child to demonstrate understanding in
alternative ways. There was a surprising amount of transience among homeschoolers,
with many changing programs on a yearly, or bi-yearly basis.
Was there one pivotal event that caused you to choose homeschooling?

There was no one common answer to this question. Some parents mentioned conflicts that their child had experienced in class, or in the playground; issues that were referred to as bullying by some, or as personality conflicts by others. These conflicts were not always between students, but were sometimes between students and teachers, or parents and teachers. Others spoke of their child not fitting in at school, or not being happy attending school. Some suggested that their children simply were not being inspired, and that their ability level was too mature for the peer group their child was with. Some parents said that their children complained about school and that they felt it (school) was trying too much to make quiet compliant children out of them. This question had some parents referring to their own education and stating that they did not want their children to have to experience what they went through.

Several parents mentioned structure as a negative aspect of schooling. One parent suggesting that unstructured learning in the long run has better outcomes. Structure was also said to be tied to finances and districts being able to justify their existence, and receive accreditation and show a certain number of children reaching a certain level of performance. The institutionalized nature of schooling was widely perceived as negative.

There are parents who choose homeschooling because they are not happy with the public school system. Do these new public models represent a middle ground, and a way of bringing children back to public schools?

One parent mentioned that the principal of one homelearner program referred to his district’s program as being a bridge between home and school. The subject of choice in schooling came up and parents mentioned Montessori schools, fine arts schools and
other programs as alternatives. Among these programs, homeschooling was another available option.

Several parents said that they felt they might choose to enroll their children in a public high school to provide them with courses that they themselves did not feel capable of teaching, particularly courses in math and sciences.

There was not always a consensus regarding public school homeschooling programs being a middle ground. Money was often referred to as the main reason parents were involved with public schools. Parents stressed that their philosophies about education did not coincide with having their children return to the classroom, but that the money being offered was a strong incentive and allowed for more options. Some parents appreciated that following the provincial curriculum, and working together with a certified teacher, meant they were better aligned with expectations for children of the same age. These same parents sometimes expressed feeling more confident in themselves and their choice to homeschool knowing that they were being helped by a teacher and several mentioned that family support was easier when enrolled through a school district.

Some people have described public school home-learner programs as revenue generators for school districts. What do you think of that statement?

Virtually all parents agreed with this statement, but did not often see it in a negative light. One parent commenting that it was surely better to use a few empty classes in a school with declining enrollment as homelearner program rooms, than to see the schools close due to lack of students. Parents mentioned that several district spokespeople were upfront about their programs being revenue generators. One parent called it a win-win situation where homeschoolers got increased services and options,
while districts got funding equal to that given to children enrolled in a classroom, without the same overhead costs of a bricks and mortar classroom. Homeschoolers were no longer on the periphery of public education, but were now being actively sought out by school districts. As one principal starting up a homelearner program said “Just under 200 students will get our district over a million dollars.” At the annual British Columbia Homelearners Conference, school districts set up extensive displays, hospitality suites and promotional material to sell their program. In the researchers observations these events were always well attended by the public.

*Parents may be hesitant about their abilities to teach, and about being perceived by some relatives and friends as unqualified to teach. Do public school’s home-learners programs offer legitimacy to homeschooling?*

This question received two types of reaction. One, in which stories about unsupportive family members or friends were shared and discussed, another where the question of legitimacy was challenged. Parents did question whether they would be able to teach and had some hesitations. Support groups were often mentioned as a way that parents gained confidence in their decision to homeschool, and where they met peers who shared similar values to their own. Several parents felt these groups, which typically met once a month, were valuable not only for themselves, but for their children as well. Parents might discuss different ways of teaching, favourite field trips, different learning styles, or any other topic of concern. The children were able to meet others who shared their situation. Several parents felt that this contact with other homeschooled children allowed their child to know they were not alone and that they could share stories and concerns with similarly educated children.
Some parents who had been homeschooling for longer periods of time spoke of trusting both themselves and their children to learn together. Parents often spoke of teaching their child as being an education for themselves as much as for their children.

One parent rolled her eyes and laughed recalling the battles with grandparents who worried that she was quite wrong to want to homeschool, and that it would be stifling for the children. This same parent said that opposition softened dramatically when she said that her child’s program was being overseen by a certified teacher and was run through the local school district. For some parents public homeschool programs did add legitimacy to the choice of parents to homeschool.

Several parents answered this question by referring to numerous parents they knew who homeschooled and were also professional teachers. One parent said that parents are the child’s first teacher and they were naturally qualified to teach because of their complete commitment to the best interest of the child.

Some parents did not believe that homeschooling needed legitimacy; as if that suggestion was that it was somehow illegal or wrong. It was mentioned that British Columbia had some of the greatest freedoms on the continent in terms of parent’s rights to homeschool. Many websites that serve the needs of homeschoolers often have Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) sections, and a common question is still “is it legal?” Generally this is a battle that has already been fought and won, though ignorance of homeschooler’s rights does still show up.

*By enrolling with a public school program, as opposed to registering, parents accept that their child’s education will be overseen, assessed and evaluated by a member of the B.C. College of Teachers, comply with provincial curriculum,*
and receive regular reports. Are these requirements a threat to parental autonomy?

Most parents did not feel that these requirements were a threat to their autonomy, although one parent did express a belief that she did not need the programs and that she was enrolled for the money. Several parents spoke of the requirements being helpful in organizing their programs and those relatives were put at ease by the regulations.

How is the public school program you are involved in different from homeschooling without the assistance of any school personnel?

What would you like people to know about why you have chosen to homeschool?

These two questions were rarely asked, as I determined that it did not apply to most parents and often the content of earlier responses had already answered them.

If you could send one message to classroom teachers, what would it be?

This question provided a great deal of data from parents. Some parents began listing complaints about schooling in general, whereas others answered more specifically, directing their comments to teachers. The most common thread of comments was that parents wanted to see more attention given to different learning styles and abilities. Parents often expressed a strong desire to have structured, organized classrooms where teachers had control and order.

A number of parents also mentioned teachers needing to see children as individuals, and this often led to a discussion about specific problems that one child may have had with one teacher. Two parents mentioned teachers sometimes teaching for too long and being burned out and uninspired as a problem.
Most parents acknowledged that teaching was a very difficult job and expressed appreciation for those they saw as inspired and committed teachers. Class-size was seen not as a teacher’s fault, but as a difficulty they had to work with. Some parents expressed their belief that public schools were very important and that they supported them.

Several parents said that teachers needed to get their students out of the classroom and that teachers had to be creative in using their community more as a resource. In particular, three parents felt that teachers had to make more effort to include the community and its elders as members of the school.

The most common thread of answers to this question was that parents wanted teachers to care deeply about children and be passionate about their work.

Is there anything else that you had wanted to discuss that I have not asked about?

Most parents answered that they had nothing else to add. Several parents said that they wanted to say what an enjoyable experience homeschooling had been for them. One parent referring to it as a real privilege to teach her own children. Another saying that they were glad they had tried it and felt it had been beneficial for the whole family.

Is there another family that you think would be interested in sharing their views about public school homeschooling through this interview format?

This question led to two contacts, one of which was interviewed.

Interview #1

Interviewee #1 is a mother of two boys aged five and two. She has homeschooled her five year old through Kindergarten. She has chosen to enroll with the local public
school homeschooling program largely as a way of having help for herself and of appeasing the concerns of her family and spouse.

Homeschooling fits closely with a personal philosophy of self-directed learning that she embraces. She describes her son as different in many ways and not fitting into normal expectations due to his temperament. She decided to try homeschooling after a very negative experience in bringing her boy to preschool, as well as having a negative view of public schooling in general due in part to her and her husband’s negative experiences in school. Negative socialization through school classrooms was seen as a very negative influence and was, along with reimbursement money, a major motivation for homeschooling.

Both the husband and the extended family were hesitant about homeschooling. She describes them as very analytical and questioning of homeschooling. When she told the grandparents that she was considering homeschooling they had asked if she was qualified, and why she would want to do this? When she explained that she was going through a public school, that a BC certified teacher was overseeing the education, she said, “there was kind of a look of relief on their face.” She also mentioned that her husband was skeptical of the idea, but that “having a B.C. certified teacher looking over what you are doing…submitting a portfolio three times a year, and getting report cards at the end of the year helped appease his doubts.” She said that lack of confidence in herself was the reason she chose to enroll, rather than register her son. In her situation she felt the public school system helped legitimize homeschooling in the eyes of others. She said, “It gave me confidence to say to other people, mostly relatives…we are enrolled with a program with one of the public schools.” “A lot of people have the perception that
homeschoolers are hippies”, she said, “or religious fanatics or they have some thing about
society where they don’t want their kids to be tainted by society or something like that.
Those aren’t my motivations at all, none of them are”, she explained, “but when people
hear someone is homeschooling they always think ‘why on earth would you do that?’” “It
[the public school program] sort of gave me the push to actually do it and to get more
support from my external family”.

Her son’s temperament and learning style also had a lot to do with choosing to
homeschool. Pre-school was “a real eye-opener for me, and I thought he had some
behavioural things. I thought something was wrong with him and he wasn’t acting normal
like the rest of the kids.” She described a boy who did not participate in circle time, did
not enjoy art activities or socializing and “just wanted to come home”. She said that “he
is either going to get labeled or have some problems in school and I don’t want him to go
through that.” “I have the mindset that children …learn naturally and shouldn’t be forced
to learn in a certain way that they are not comfortable with…” She spoke of her son
“really having some different things about him from normal kids.” She said that her son
“has some security fear and attachments, and she does not mind that…[but says that]
school culture opposes that.” She said that homeschooling “has given me a real sense of
who my child is [and that homeschooling is] having him begin to know who he is.”

Though enrolled in a public program this parent was critical of parts of how the
program unfolded for her son. “They are writing a report card where sometimes the
information is not accurate…they have said these things about my child and it is written
on paper and now it is a record and it is not right.” She said that a report card said her son
could not identify lower case letters, which she disagreed with, and needed help counting
from one to ten. "[He] can count to a thousand," she said. "...The report card process is being written by the teacher when they haven't even taught my child!" The school offered classes, however she said, "the teachers did not want the parents there. The first couple of classes, maybe. But then it is 'parents out'". "The one thing I feel threatened by, or annoyed by is the report card process being written by the teacher when they haven't even taught my child. I do not know how you go about changing that", she mused, then added, "Well I do know how: I am going to Wondertree."

After one year with the local school program this parent said that the following year she was going to enroll with Wondertree, an independent school program. "Their educational philosophy is sort of my life philosophy: Knowing the self and becoming part of a community of learners, and using mentors; that really appeals to me", she said. "They are an independent school... they are not as stringent with the curriculum that has to be used, with the outcomes that have to be met." Another appealing aspect of Wondertree for her was their realization that "learning does not just take place in the classroom. It takes place seven days, 24 hours a day." She described learning at Wondertree as happening "through the community...parents submit their resumes...act as mentors...it is natural learning."

Socialization at school played a part in this family's decision to homeschool. "I had such a negative social experience with schools. [My husband] did too." She did a lot of reading about socialization and schools and "came to the conclusion, even based on my own experiences at school, that school doesn't teach you to socialize and it is not a great place for social development." The more she researched and thought about the issue the more convinced she became that age segregation was not natural; "it's not the real
"[The] number one thing I think is that there are too many kids in a classroom... they can’t meet the needs of all the children [or] even get to know a child." “The school system is a one size fits all system in general [and] each child learns in a different manner.

When asked about a message she would like to send teachers, she told of many teachers she knew who homeschooled. One in particular she said operates part of her public school classroom on what she called an unschooling principle for part of the day. “She doesn’t follow the curriculum...her reporting is different...she calls it unschooling where she says she just lets the learning flow naturally; where she has the children sort of direct what it is they are going to talk about for the day or for that session.” “I have met teachers who have quit because of the way the system is and they pull their kids...because [they] don’t like the system anymore, or they are just tired of the system and the way there is too much structure.

**Interview #2**

This couple are parents of two children, 11 and 14 years old, who have been homeschooled their entire lives. Both parents are involved in the daily teaching of their children, though the mother is the primary educator. The family’s motivations were based primarily around wanting to be with their children and enjoying the learning process with them. They stated that they were not disillusioned or fed up with the public system, however they were critical of some government demands related to education. Their philosophy around schooling was based on natural learning and following the interests and passions of the children, which was at times problematic when complying with
public homelearner programs. The family was very community oriented, and had been actively involved with a local support group for home-based learners since before beginning homeschooling. The parents believed that service and volunteer work were important components of their children’s learning. The family regularly attended church, but they were not homeschooling for religious reasons. The parents said that being passionate about learning with the children and sharing that passion with children was one of the most important things any teacher or parent could pass on to children. They have remained enrolled in a public school homeschooling program primarily as a way of ensuring graduation and “keeping doors open for the children’s future”, despite some misgivings about certain aspects, particularly grading, of public schooling.

When first considering homeschooling, the parents read extensively and joined a local support group. They went to conferences, attended sets of seminars and saw presentations, among them one by Dorothy and Raymond Moore. They were impressed with their themes of service and entrepreneurialism, and the statistics that this couple presented showing how positively homeschooling affected children. They read books by John Holt, A.S.Neill, and others. The family met with other families that were homeschooling and liked the way their children were progressing. The parents believed that an inter-generational community was preferable to grade grouping, so instead of enrolling with the local Kindergarten class they registered their child and began homeschooling.

For the first year the mother enrolled her eldest with Gold Trail School District #74 in Ashcroft. She said it was an interesting experience to write up the learning program, and then report it in once at the end of the year. When asked if that was all the
contact she had with Gold Trail, the parent stated that she “didn’t have any contact.”

The next year she chose to enroll with a program that was computer based and offered courses to parents in the Lower Mainland who were enrolling their children.

The parents believed that there are fewer parents doing homeschooling via what they called “the traditional” registration route and that there is increased demand for the more structured programs. That said, both parents emphasized a belief that unstructured, natural learning was, in the long run, a better way to educate people to become independent thinkers. One parent said that “they are adding too much structure; it is all around finances and being able to justify their existence.” They argued that districts were focusing too much on “percentages of children meeting performance targets to get accredited and get their money.”

There was parental distrust of government motivations for increasing the number of people entering public school homeschooling programs. Both felt that the “choices being offered were great” and that British Columbia laws may be the best in the world [for homeschoolers], however there was apprehension of the possibility of losing rights. “As more homeschoolers enroll with public school districts”, the father said, “The percentage of those simply registering is decreasing.” “Governments can change overnight,” said one parent. “...If these programs are good enough for 95% of the people then you [registering parents] have to do it too,” she suggested. This, she believed, would

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56 This story coincides with the 2001-2002 audits by the Ministry of Education on Gold Trail that showed that the district was receiving full funding for students outside of the catchment area. The report was also critical that one teacher was overseeing over 600 students and parents were allowed to create their own programming. There was also a $500 grant given to parents allowing them to choose any materials they wanted. An audit by the Ministry of Education determined that 648 students were “receiving a homeschool program and do not qualify for full funding under section 108 of the School Act” The Ministry of Education set a de facto fine by reducing grant money to the Gold Trail district by $2,549,063.
force registering parents to enroll. The parents said that this was historically how changes had recently happened in Alberta.

Enrolling instead of registering is, for this couple, about both money and keeping opportunities available for their children. “I felt like I sold my soul for money…and that piece of paper [graduation]” “...it was very stressful having deadlines and having to follow things exactly and to cover certain things. When they first enquired about registering with a local school, which they had heard [correctly] was an option, the local school ‘were just not interested at all.” “… Budgets are so tight at the school districts and they see families leaving for homeschooling and now there is a way for them to keep them…and I think they get the same budget as someone in the school.”

Enrolling did have a benefit in terms of reducing pressure from family. “As soon as we enrolled somewhere the pressure from the extended family disappeared…As soon as we got a report card from the school everything was beautiful [to relatives].”

Both children have been enrolled with a far away district program and the parents view the program positively. They spoke of a friend who used the program and credited the teacher with helping one of the children get into college. “The teacher was aware of the entrance requirements and had the child complete certain courses to help gain admittance.” They were admitted as mature students because they did not get a high school graduation certificate, however the careful selection of courses was credited with them getting accepted into college. The program also offered workshops for the parents on how to teach, as well as individualized attention from a teacher assigned to the children. With one child the family said they were not looking for contact, but for the
other they were. "The teacher was really inspiring for [him]. [He] sent in projects, hard
copies, emails, photographs, and video cassettes of him playing music." The teacher
"would have a look at it and make his comments and email back and say there was this
website to look up more to further his knowledge... It was quite good." Contact was by
phone or email. The parents felt that the program had the most experience, and that their
son in particular enjoyed computer technology, which is an important focus of this
program. They were "very happy" with the teachers they were assigned.

The question of socialization drew strong comments and emotional reactions from
this couple. "It is just a crock...they ask about it and say 'do you think it is unnatural to
go to school and be exposed [to others]? Because they are going to get that in real life. I
just say actually they don't... 40 people all the same age! When after you leave school
does that happen? I think that being in school is unnatural, but it has become natural."
The parents "wanted to keep that inspiration and curiosity going in [their] children." "I
think the socialization [for homeschoolers] is actually better for the kids. They can
actually talk to people in different age groups...really young people, adults, seniors."
They shared a story of a time on a ferry when they were traveling with another
homeschooling family. "There was quite an age group of kids playing together. Someone
who had just come from a conference with school children came up and complimented
them saying "they had never seen a group of kids like that before. It was a real pleasure
seeing them get along and help each other play their games." "When they get into groups
it is not a clique thing, they are not really concerned about what they are wearing or how
their hair is done.
Mentors were discussed as an important type of socialization. This family felt it was “very important to connect with adults” that could offer knowledge that they themselves did not possess. “In our church we have had different people in our lives mentoring our children, so if I can’t do something and that is what my child wants to do then I find somebody who will continue to inspire them, or I find someone to fit their interests” “There was someone who offered lessons for [our son] in the bagpipes because [he] was so keen and he didn’t charge us.” Finding mentors is sometimes done through local support groups: “[A parent she knew] is an artist, so she shares that love of art with my children.” People that love what they are doing and you can get them to share that with your child… that is the ultimate!” These parents have been finding that the children are beginning to ‘drive that kind of mentorship themselves; they’ll do the phoning and they will organize the get-togethers.” One child wants to join the Coast Guard, so has gone on five field trips to the Coast Guard station.

When asked what one message they would like to send to teachers both parents thought long before answering. “Share your passion and bond with children…that love of adventuring and learning: that is the real key.” When recalling the teachers that they themselves liked they said they were “impassioned and inspired and loved what they are doing.”

One parent, in criticizing the graded curriculum, asked “who drives the concept that you have to learn Japan in whatever grade and Canada in another?” A suggestion to those running homeschool programs was to hire staff that were “really keen and flexible and willing to put in the hours, and try stuff and maybe even bend the rules a little bit to accommodate some of these families The parents knew a professor at a local university
who also homeschooled her children. At university she taught in the education faculty and said that “it was interesting that the techniques they were starting to use were really independent learning and not being told what to do all the time, and mentoring, and for her what she was teaching these professors to do was exactly the philosophy that happens in homeschooling and they were capturing it, or trying to, in the university. Even when she was taking her teacher training she was homeschooling. She said it was almost impossible to put the theory into practice the way the school system is set up.” ...All the great mentoring and learning...is almost impossible in the classroom setting. The parents felt that grade grouping of children was unnatural and that class-sizes in schools were increasing and often exceeded 30 children even in elementary years. The one to one of homeschooling was what really allowed the children to be inspired.

The one common theme that these parents returned to was the importance of what they called ‘natural learning’ which they defined as “following a child’s interests instead of being dictated by the government on the learning outcomes and IRPs (Integrated Resource Packages)”. By homeschooling, these parents believed that they could allow their children to follow their own interests. Some of the difficulty with enrolling with public school homeschooling programs was that the parents felt more and more restrictions were being imposed on them regarding what they ‘had to’ teach their children. Natural learning is often associated with ‘unschooling’, which is far removed from participation with public schooling, and often embraces the idea of completely self-directed learning outside of traditional learning institutions. The parents worried about increased restrictions, but still felt that homeschooling was a positive choice for parents
and that some involvement with the public school systems, although not perfect, still allowed greater options for their child.

Interview #3

Interviewee # 3 is a single mother with a boy and girl who have homeschooled since grades one and three. She was very critical of most educational experiences her children have had and was focused on the needs and wants of her children. She shifted between numerous programs to suit the changing needs and demands of her children and says that money was one of her primary motivations for homeschooling through the public school system. Her criticism of schooling focuses not on public schools per se, but on mass schooling of large groups of children in general. She has expressed strong dislikes for marks and grade specific studies, as well as the need for children to “prove” they have learned a concept.

Initially she tried a Montessori Kindergarten parent participation program. The teacher was apparently “appalled that the child was not able to read at age five. She thought she would “give public school a try”, and enrolled her children in grade one and three classes. By January she said she knew it was not the place for her child. “{They were} so advanced... [Their] peer group was the teachers,” She said [they were] frustrated with peers and “would stand up and complain (to their classmates) that the teacher had explained it 15 times. Don’t you get it! When half the class was ESL, they did not get it.” At the end of one year in public school she asked for testing of her son. “He was nine years ahead in some subjects,” she claimed. She says that she discussed it with her son and gave him the choice of staying in school or homeschooling, and he
chose to finish the year at school. “My daughter I had concerns for the exact opposite reasons. She was so compliant... A teacher’s dream: bright, eager to learn, paid attention; not in the bottom, not in the top. I thought that she would get so ignored.” This parent complained of “the whole social thing of not knowing her own mind.” The mother recalled her child listing “reasons she never wanted to go to school again. Things like putting up hands to go pee, counting at the water fountain, lining up to go places... absurd things like that.”

When asked why she chose to enroll with a public school home learner program she stated that: “I have always been enrolled because I want money. Money is nice.”

Both children first used an Internet based homeschool program for four years. “They were offering the most money for the least amount of reporting.” One child skipped grade four, went through grades 5, 6, 7, and 8. During high school [the program began] “wanting more demonstrated observations of learning.” [They] used to have a default to C grading. Everyone needs a grade and you can pick a C if you wish. I didn’t hand in anything and they gave [one child] a D. When I complained to them they said they would get him a C grade. The last year someone who didn’t meet with my children didn’t talk to my children and didn’t teach my children assigned them a letter grade. She removed her children from the program and switched to a local public homelearner program.

They had teacher support in the area, however her son “did not like writing things down... only did it in his head.” She said, “[They] makes us pretend we are doing the BC curriculum. They will say ‘look at the IRPs’, and I will say yah, sure. We are doing them
and that is what they base their three evaluations on.” “[One] grade 7 teacher gave [her child an] incomplete in every subject. She, the...teacher, expects little schools at home.” Following a year with this program she pulled one child and moved them to an Independent school offering home education programs. Her child “was upset about how everything needed to be reported. [They do] not like to be pressured, ever!” She said that her child has embarked on a self-design program and “is happy for the first time. [They] can do what [they] want. Together the parent and child provide anecdotal reports weekly to learning consultants at [the program]. The consultant ‘takes information and then does ‘official stuff’ with that and finds PLOs for it.” We are not going for the Dogwood [graduation certificate]. “Both are avid readers and I trust them,” she said, “when they are interested they will do it.”

Public homeschool programs offered this parent a sense of legitimacy, particularly in the eyes of previously unsupportive relatives. “With [the program we are in] we have school pictures, field trips, report cards. I do not get as much flack from grandparents and my sister, now that they know a teacher is overseeing their schooling.”

Her message to teachers: “For goodness sake, relax, it is just school. Get over yourselves. It is not important, marks. Grading is not a holy grail; relax and trust children. Stop making everyone prove everything to you. The thing I do not like about mass education is that it is not appropriate for most. A classroom setting in a group is never going to reach everyone... There is no critical learning period to learn about Greece. If you are 43 years old and decide you are interested in Greece, pick up a book. Information can be had. As soon as I assign something, [my kids] hate it.” She also was very annoyed at the apparent lack of privacy in a busy public high school office that one child briefly
enrolled in. She recalled one secretary calling across the office that a certain girl, who was stood there, had failed every course she had taken. She was appalled at the lack of respect for privacy, saying, “I wonder what they are saying about my kid?”

This parent felt several of her friends needed to be homeschooling their children. Some were bullied, one to the point of attempting suicide, others were openly gay, and another had multiple health problems she said included environmental allergies, attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder and Tyrettes.

This parent consistently referred to money as being the main reason she was enrolled in a program. She demonstrated a strong distrust and cynicism to almost all aspects of the education system and frequently moved from one program to the other. The concerns and interests of her children were paramount and she did not appear to have developed any positive relationships with educators.

**Interview #4**

Interviewee #4 and her husband have two boys, one in grade seven the other in grade four who were homeschooled for a period of just under one year. One of the primary motivations for their decision to homeschool was to be closer as a family to where the father worked. The husband is often away for extended periods of time due to his work. This family remained enrolled with their local school throughout their time homeschooling. This parent supported her school, but felt some aspects of teaching had not evolved and that school systems were not using current research to improve teaching.

The mother was very involved and supportive of her local elementary school. She was on the Parent Advisory Council and coached in the school. Her decision to
homeschool was done with the understanding and assistance of the school principal and vice-principal, both of whom wanted her and her two boys to remain part of the school. This parent felt that the school supported the family in their desire to homeschool. The unique feature of this family’s experience was that they remained not only registered and enrolled with their local school, but on the class lists for their grades, despite not attending school. “They are after you, they want you so badly; they wanted to get the financing for your child. The next year they were phoning me to make sure I was going to be on the books.” The two children represented over $10 000 for the school.

This parent had strong opinions about lack of teaching to different learning styles in both public and private schools. “School is better for girls. They will sit still, and they are better auditorial learners”, she said. Boys, she felt, were more kinesthetic; a learning style that she believed was not emphasized enough. A favourite teacher that one of her son’s had, found a way of having daily physical education classes, which she said was rarely the case with other teachers, but absolutely essential for the proper development of children, particularly, she believed, for children entering puberty whom she said had a lot of energy and a need to move around and get out of their desks.

She felt that given class sizes of 30 or more students, it was impossible for a teacher to know and teach to the particular style of each child. At home she felt she could focus on her boys’ strengths and particular learning style. This parent did not like the system of marking (A,B,C-, etc) which she felt did not allow both her children to feel success for their strengths. Rather, she said, only the academic child felt successful. “If, as a parent, you are not reinforcing that marks don’t mean everything then for some it is terrible.” “I have a friend whose child was ‘different’. She might have been bullied or
picked on [at school], yet she was brilliant.” This friend had chosen to homeschool her child to protect her from bullying and to help her celebrate her type of intelligence.

This parent’s two boys were very different in school. The eldest, in grade seven at the time, was a straight A student, who after one year of homeschooling asked to go back to school because he missed his friends. The other younger son she called “my good enough kid.” He would do the minimum just to get it over with, but “would not really learn anything.” She felt he did not recognize his potential. At school he got along well with people, did not cause trouble, but did not do well academically. She felt that he did well only when she and her husband were directly involved in the learning process. With someone to prompt and cajole he was able to complete academic work, otherwise he would not. He was a competitive athlete and won gold medals provincially in aquatics, something he had no difficulty focusing on.

While homeschooling, the boys were inspired by each other. They finished their work and then could go out and play and go on hikes. The family lived by the ocean and spent a lot of time studying sea life, tides and the patterns of nature. When the older boy returned to school the mother continued homeschooling the younger child but said that the dynamics of only one child was completely different from working with the two boys, and after a few months the younger boy returned to a grade five class. The mother said that she had felt isolated, and that without the older sibling that the younger boy relied too heavily on the parent to keep him working. As a threesome homeschooling worked, as a pair it did not.
The local homeschool support group was large and viewed by this parent as very important. Families got together once a week and took the strengths of the individual parents and shared them. "One led French lessons and another did sign language." Other parents might lead groups on field trips. The mums there were very social." This parent felt the support group was an essential and beneficial part of the experience. The group offered resources in terms of where to go, what to teach and how to teach different things. What seemed more important though was the emotional and social support that was shared. Parents who were new to homeschooling met weekly with those who had been educating their children at home for many years. As a support group they shared stories and celebrated successes.

One of the disappointments with the school system that this parent expressed was that "education has not evolved!" This parent had appreciation for teachers and felt that teaching was very hard to do, however she felt that modern ideas, particularly to do with brain research, had not found their way into most educational systems. In answering my question of what one message she would like to send to classroom teachers, she said, "The problem does not lie with the teachers, but with the entire system." She suggested that structured teaching, along with clear criteria and boundaries was good, but that school is often mundane and boring, and needed to be fun in order to engage children. "Books should be fun, so many go through school and reading is a chore. When is learning fun? When it is thrown at you? In grade six what do they care about what orders of government there are?" She cited her own children's school that was next to a large wildlife park area, yet not once in seven years did the teachers take her children there. "Get them out of the class," she said. "Learning is driven by interest. If you are interested
in something you will learn it. They would be better off learning practical skills: gardening, building with wood, fixing an engine.”

Good teaching should be evolving, she said, and contemporary knowledge of right brain/left brain research should be incorporated into teaching. She gave an example of an exercise involving holding the nose with one hand and the ear with the other hand and alternating hands that is designed to stimulate both sides of the brain. She does this, and other exercises, with children she coaches, saying that they just find it funny, but that it does stimulate both sides of their brain and makes people more ready to learn. Children may be musical, kinesthetic, artistic, or have strong interpersonal skills, yet schools, she felt, rarely taught to all of these learning styles. “Art, music programs, they have lost it all,” she lamented. “Statistics prove that music enhances math, it stimulates the brain. You can find the musical kids also do well in math...we are a backward system, it is all about money.”

This parent, despite some misgivings, spoke very favourably of her local school, emphasizing the importance of working with families: “Public schooling needs huge home support. Public schools need to keep the communications open; to have an open door. If I am going by on what my kid says then I get a report that says it is not fine, there is a problem.” The vice-principal at her local school seemed to have developed a good relationship with this family, and perhaps because of the open communications she was more comfortable in returning her children to the public school. When asked if she would homeschool again she said she wished she had done it when her children were in their primary years.
Interview #5

These parents had two girls in grades one and three whom they homeschooled. Their motivations stemmed from dissatisfaction with a particular teacher the child was placed with and with the social environment at the school. Both parents considered it a real privilege to homeschool their child and felt that grade grouping was not a good way for schools to educate people.

After Public Kindergarten the eldest child was switched to a private school and the parents said it was an unhappy situation for her. “She didn’t mesh with the teacher and the whole class atmosphere wasn’t conducive to learning... Lots of crying. We were not getting support to change her classroom. There were some things with the other students. We did not want a wasted year.” The parents knew friends and relatives who were homeschooling and the mother has taught in public schools for over 15 years. The mother took a leave to homeschool her eldest girl. Because she was a teacher she said “I kept it very hush-hush at first because I am a teacher and I was kind of embarrassed to be homeschooling. I was never in favor of homeschooling and thought it was a terrible thing to do. When asked why, she said, “the big thing was the social aspect, kids working together in groups... everything that the school offers. Homeschooling was never something that entered my mind.” Within a few weeks, though, I was hooked. At the beginning of the first year the mother phoned the Ministry of Education and said she needed guidelines about homeschooling. She said that nobody knew about homeschooling, and said they would get back to her, but nobody got back to them.

After less than a month at a private school the parents removed their child from grade one and registered her with the local school and began their homeschooling. “We
got together once a week with other friends who were homeschooling.” The mother taught everything in the mornings, and the afternoons were for gymnastics, music lessons, swimming, and play times with friends. Friday was field trip day visiting her grandmother.

The pivotal event that lead this couple to choose homeschooling was the dynamics in the private school classroom their daughter was in. “... No control. She [the teacher] asked kids to do things and nothing happened. They did whatever they wanted, walking out of the class. It was just this one teacher. We heard how in grade one the teacher thought a kid was learning and then at the end of the year it was... Oh, sorry, the kid can’t read. Why was that missed?"

There was also competition in and out of the classroom and the mother said she had never seen her child so stressed. The parents believed socialization was negative at school. “Parents were getting their kids to compete with birthday gifts, outfits, what activities is your child in. It was keeping up with the Jones’... Consumerism. Our daughter fit in fine but it was more how we perceived the future was going to go. The older they get the more aware they will become of trying to fit in themselves. Grade seven is a lot of peer pressure; who is wearing what, who is going where, how you look. The [neighbourhood] parents are gearing their children for this in Kindergarten. It is about status.” “[By homeschooling] I think we are teaching them principles that will be good for them.

During Kindergarten the school suggested to the parents that their daughter might have learning problems. This, the parents said, was based on the child not remembering
the alphabet. The school said they needed to have her assessed and that she did have a learning problem. The mother said, (“You know what? She doesn’t care about the alphabet, but if she cared about it she would learn it.”) The parents believed that putting their daughter in learning assistance class would be destructive to the girl’s self-esteem, and that she would give up. “It was more to do with her temperament and learning style than a learning problem,” the parent said. “We homeschooled to save our daughter from her grade one experience,” said the mother.

For the first year of homeschooling their eldest in grade one the parents registered with the local school and then began teaching. She had telephoned her local school district and “they said ‘you are doing what?’” and were unaware of a homeschooling program, despite the fact that they did have a program at the time. They also contacted a neighbouring district. Initially the mother was very structured, however after a month she said she eased up and looked more for teachable moments. “Conversations with her led the way.” That year was an absolute delight,” she said referring to the year she registered her child. “The first year I didn’t have to do any reports. I could have done diddlysquat that first year and nobody would have cared.

“ In the first year my aunt and mum were asking, “What are you doing to them?" Once they started seeing what she was doing it was wonderful. For them it was fear of the unknown. Now they are more convinced we are doing the right thing.” She spoke of apprehensions of what will be introduced into the school system. “Teachers are having to be more accepting and they don’t want to see their niece exposed to a lot of distraction in the school system. High achievers, ESL, special needs; teachers efforts are diverted. Poor learners are taking up too much time. The focus is not on education.” In referring to her
first ten years of teaching she said she had accomplished so much and now it is cut back. “Now you have to teach computers, your own phys. ed., and there are a lot more special events in the school. Every Friday there would be another group coming in. You are watering down. You are enriching them by exposing them to ‘neat’ activities but it is taking away from the actual work time. “What do I stop teaching to do these new ideas?”

Following a year of organizing her own program through simply registering with a school she telephoned her own district and “they said ‘you are doing what?’” and were unaware of a homeschooling program, despite the fact that they did have a program at the time. The parents also contacted several neighbouring school districts, eventually settling on one district’s program because “it was conservative, professional looking, with an emphasis on art and science.” They said that [they] hired artists and ‘science people’ and had a lot of good field trips.

Both parents believed there is more accountability now that they are enrolled in a program compared to registering, even though the reporting is stressful. The mother has two curriculums on the go, major term assignments per grade. Science, socials, language Arts and math are all incorporated. “September we had to do an overview on a month by month basis. We (parent and teacher) plot out the whole year.”

“What could be better than a one-on-one ratio with a registered teacher? Grade one and two you have to get those basics. Learning to write is difficult and you need a structured environment. There was a lot of experimentation in the 70s. There is the debate between teaching phonics or whole language. Phonics was heading out the door. You should use a little bit of everything. One is not better than another. Societally we
understand there is more of a systems approach. There is no way that a teacher can adapt to every single need of every single student in terms of their exact learning methodology.

Both parents believed that boys and girls learned in different ways. One year the mother had a classroom of mostly boys and she ran it differently than if it had been a classroom of girls. “First thing every morning I took them outside and we ran about a mile. We clocked their distances, etc. to see if they could run the equivalent of a marathon. You had to keep it changing. You get quiet kids some years who can sit for two hours, but not generally with boys.”

The father believed it was a big mistake to divide people up in grade groups. “Ks, primary groups, intermediate groups, pre-teen, teens, pre-university.” He said that we do this “without realizing we are human beings who live from when we are born to when we die and we are part of society and we are without a complete and holistic view.

Homeschooling provides a much broader perspective. Here in a homeschool environment what do my kids see? They are sometimes involved in a classroom [and] they are there with kids from K-7, then they are out visiting with older people, then they are shopping, doing music lessons where they are getting an exposure to people in their twenties. How did the old one-room schoolhouse work?” he asked. “The teacher made assignments and everybody had to work together Grade sixes might teach the grade ones as well as do their own work. In a sense there was more internal support in the school. It is rare to see mixed classes today.”

Music was important for this family because parents believed it helps develop the child’s mind and “learn to think in a disciplined way...it is like learning another
language. Music helps make the connections in the brain. There is the manual side and there is the mental side and there is the learner side and you put all these things together. Mathematics and music are patterns, math is patterns.” The parents were unhappy with provincial funding, because “Music is one of the first things that they cut.”

When asked what message they would like to send to teachers and schools the mother and former teacher said, “It is the time I treasure, no interruptions; time to just sit and explain and work things out. Not a day would go by in class where you didn’t get interrupted.” The father added, “One of the biggest things is that we are training a society that cannot focus. If you are going to get something done you have to focus. You have to train kids to focus and it worries me from a broader societal perspective.

If you are into a task, give the teacher the ability to run the class as they want to run it.” “Writing and talking is what most peoples’ jobs are. So at the primary years I don’t think it is important that they get computers.” There was a sense that imposed curricular requirements were stifling teachers: “Let the teacher do what they feel is important in bringing the child along in terms of those fundamental things.”

**Interview #6**

This couple has four children, of whom three are homeschooled. The eldest is 13 years old, with the youngest being three. All children had attended public schools or preschool and were homeschooling for the first time. This family was unique among the parents interviewed, as both mother and father shared equally in the homeschooling responsibilities. The parents were self-employed and worked seasonally in a tourist related industry. The parents described the way they approached homeschooling as
‘unschooling’ and they had difficulty functioning within the public school homeschooling model. After “several frustrating months”[six] homeschooling with a public school program, this family removed all three children from the program and “ceased any formal schooling”. These parents were supportive of the need for a public school system, but not for their children. They believed that “a small percentage of all children should learn at their own pace,” and that it was unnecessary to teach reading, writing or math, formally. The parents traveled to numerous areas of Europe and Asia during a six month period of their homeschooling experiences and considered this an important part of their learning and socialization.

The parents were adamant that they were no longer homeschooling, but referred to themselves as home learners. The inclusion of the word ‘school’ in homeschooling was something they said, “suggested the building and traditions of mainstream education” that they had grown to not support. “Learning, education and schooling have become synonymous, but they are not. You do not have to go to school to become educated,” argued one parent. “I do not want formal, pencil and paper testing and daily drills to both zap the enthusiasm of my children and get in the way of their learning.” “Schools”, said the father, “are outdated models based on the needs of the industrial revolution of the late 19th Century. Schooling more often serves the needs of business and industry than the needs of children and adults.”

The two eldest children had received extra assistance through weekly pull-outs from classes to a resource room when enrolled in their local school. There was an issue around the diagnoses of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). The school “was encouraging use of medication,” and the parents were strongly opposed to the use
of any medications, such as Ritalin. “I told them, “I am not going to drug my kid,” argued one parent. This tension over a diagnoses of ADHD was a factor in the parents decision to teach their own children at home.

The parents were very thankful for the extra class time their children received. “The teachers at that school are excellent and they have helped our children a great deal,” said the mother. The one-on-one attention they got helped them tremendously,” she said. “But we do not believe that the school has the right to suggest we medicate for a boy-biased condition.” “Psychologists like to label active children as ADHD, but to me it is just the flavour of the month ‘disease’.” “…and why,” asked one parent, “are nearly 100% of children on Ritalin, boys?” “Schools, because of their make up, can’t cope with children who will not passively sit and do as they are told. Girls will comply more often, but show a bit of spirit and exuberance and they will label you as hyper. Boys and girls, but boys particularly, need to move around a lot more than schools allow for.”

“My son’s mind wanders.” said the father. “But, so do a lot of people’s. His learning style is a little too active to stay in a seat, behind a desk… Whenever he has had a teacher who gets them out of their seats, he has done well. They are kinesthetic learners, my boys, and they need to run and move. The father mentioned that he had attention problems when he had been a boy at school, and recognized it in his own children. “It is just how he is, and how he learns. I needed to do things with my hands and disliked book learning when I was in school,” he said. “Most of all it is when [he] gets a teacher who is really strict and ‘in your face’, that he does poorly.” The mother agreed that teacher style was a very important determinant of success for their children. “Some
teachers are more able to accept his way of learning and provide a more nurturing environment that he needs,” she said.

Children's self esteem was a factor for the parent’s decision to homeschool. They reported that their children’s “comments about themselves as students were very negative.” Children referred to themselves as, “dumb and stupid at school,” and parents reported many tearful instances of children frustrated over schoolwork.

Both parents said that their children excelled at sports and felt team and individual sports were an important part of their family lives. The parents were avid ice-hockey parents and coached and assisted on numerous teams, as well as having their children in baseball and swimming. They said that public schools were “woefully inadequate” in how much regular, daily physical education they provided. “If, as a parent, I could not afford to put my child into sports, and their only opportunity lay in the schools, then I think their health would suffer. We are fortunate that we can pay for these sports, but not all parents can. For other children, obesity, too much television, and an inactive lifestyle will lead to health problems, like diabetes, later in life.” Parents did acknowledge that the school system was not entirely to blame for these issues and agreed that the home environment also played a major part in developing active lifestyles. Parents did suggest, however, that private schools had always had strong sports traditions, whereas public schools did not have the resources to make this a priority. “Sports are so important for developing a child’s sense of their own strengths and weaknesses and of being team players.” “Do they do that in public schools?” the father asked. “I think not,” he responded.
The homeschooling program they were enrolled in did allow them to receive refunds for a portion of their sports team membership fees, though only to a maximum of approximately $500 per child. They had submitted receipts for various sports activities for over $2000 for three children, of which they said $1600 was allowed. “They allowed the swimming lessons, baseball and hockey registration costs, but would not refund us for equipment or travel costs, which included tournament costs.” The parents did not feel this was unreasonable; in fact, they commended their homeschooling program for, “having a clear limit,” of how much sports costs could be reimbursed. “I would be disappointed in their bookkeeping if they allowed someone to write off 100% of their allotment on sports,” said the father. Their allowable refunds were $1000 per child, the remainder of which was spent on field-trip costs and teaching materials such as books, art supplies and paper.

Travelling was an important part of this family’s experience in homeschooling. “The children kept journals, scrapbooks, photos and video footage of their experiences...Sometimes they were quite detailed, other times less so.” The family traveled for six months and visited Ireland, Scotland, England, France, Denmark, Germany, Spain, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Egypt, India, Thailand, China and Australia. “It was a fantastic experience for all of us and brought us even closer as a family. It was a whirlwind tour, but six months allowed us to learn so much history, geography and just help the children appreciate the diversity of the world. We know that it is one of the best educations we could ever give our children and has made them better, more well-rounded people.”
“We researched our ancestors in Ireland, studied Spanish then went to Spain, studied the pyramids, then fell in love with Egypt. We went to the places that students study about in school.” The parents recalled one incident in Shanghai where they met another Canadian family with three children who were taking a year to travel. “It was one of the most reaffirming moments about why we chose to homeschool. We met these wonderful people who were traveling just like ourselves. Their children were older than ours by three or four years, but seeing their inquisitiveness, creativity and passion for life made me know we were doing the right thing.”

“Once, one of our children received a failing grade for a report they did on Australia. Now they have been there. I wonder, in the long term,” the father asked, “if what they learned in school, in Canada, will even register in their memory?” “Traveling around Australia by bus we saw some of the most beautiful landscapes and the children of course loved the Kangaroos.” That same child, who received a poor grade on his country report, wrote over 50 pages of journal entries, sketched dozens of desertscape and landscapes and even interviewed half a dozen Australians. “He did not do it for anybody but himself, and it is an example of what self-directed learning can produce. He edited some of his footage into an hour-long documentary of our family. It is a real treasure! He was eleven at the time.” It was when we were coming to the end of our tour and to see what that trip had meant to him brought tears to my eyes. Every time I watch it I know I will cry at the end when he looks into the camera and says “Mom, Dad, I know that we have all changed and grown in the last six months, and changed for the better. Thanks for making this the best time of my life.” “When I think back to that same boy who cried in frustration and thought he was stupid, then see the beautiful drawings he
produces, poems he writes, stories he invents, observations he records; I know that he is
going to be just fine in life.” The father added: “Isn’t that what every parent really wants
to know about their kid: Are they going to be happy, are they going to be OK?”

Parents spoke of their children’s social development and how they believed
traveling had affected it positively. “Coming back to Canada was a real eye-opener for
them after being away... I think they gained a real appreciation for how much we have in
North America and how truly lucky they are.” The parents say that two of their children
have become actively involved in learning about global issues such as poverty, child
labour and clean drinking water. The parents plan to travel again in a few years when
they have saved up the money.

Unschooling was mentioned as part of the parent’s philosophy. When asked to
define unschooling, the parents said it was difficult to define. They spoke of “following
the child’s lead... not pushing the written output, but following ideas and interests.” One
parent said, “unschooling was about unlearning the lessons of school, about thinking as
individuals and learning naturally.” “Unschooling means following the child’s pace and
acting more as a guide and facilitator than a teacher.”

Socialization was a topic on which both parents were passionate. They were
highly critical of the socialization that occurred at school, viewing it as a negative
influence on their children. “Our children are much nicer people when they are not
surrounded by their peers for six hours a day.” One parent cited media reports about
school bullying leading to suicides among teens as a reason to, “avoid the dangerously
negative tormenting, taunting and cruelty of high school.” Both parents agreed that at
their children's own school, bullying had not been a problem factor for them, however did believe it to be a bigger problem “at most schools.” “Yes, you are always going to get teasing among children, but as a parent I can supervise and limited how much of it they are exposed to in their early year.”

Also talked about were same aged peers, pecking orders and the differences between genders in public schools. All of these issues seemed related to socialization, an issue described as, “an emotional issue, for both of us.” “How natural is it to put 30, seven year olds together for six hours a day, five days a week for 187 days?” asked one parent. “When we arrange playtimes, which we try and do at least twice a week, I generally like to keep their time together at around three hours; after that the children tend to have had enough, and that is often when problems start. Yet look at schools with their six hours together.” “It is little wonder that there are so many problems with socialization at school. Class sizes of that size consisting of students of the same age just asks for problems,” said the mother.

“I get sick of people saying that my children are going to miss out on socialization because we homeschool. I once had an acquaintance suggest that I was being irresponsible in keeping my children at home.” “I feel that I am protecting them, but not sheltering them. I have got into very heated debates about socialization and do not like to bring it up that often.”

This couple’s experience homeschooling was coloured by their own negative experiences earlier in life and by specific problems with their local school. “I had a hard time socially in school because I was very shy and did not succeed at anything other than
sports,” said the mother. The father did not remember his school experiences favourably either. “I remember being bullied at school, and not just by the students, but by teachers as well. It was not uncommon… for certain teachers to get physical with students as discipline.” “I think teachers are better now, but I still think a lot of bullying goes on out in the playgrounds, and when teachers aren’t around,” he said.

This family held strong opinions about homeschooling and appeared to focus a large amount of time and energy to spending time with their three boys and one girl. Although they referred to their approach as unschooling, parents did keep detailed portfolios of their children’s achievements and were not entirely dismissive of the public school system. They did have difficulty with the public school homeschooling program they participated in; however felt that “public schools were moving in the right direction by encouraging homelearning.”
Turning A Blind Eye?

Registering or enrolling and who gets the money

There is some indication from the interviews that school districts sometimes skirt around the formal ministry mandates when working with some parents in their homeschooling programs. This tendency could be motivated by the very real need to retain the thousands of dollars that parents, as mobile, informed constituents, represent to cash-strapped school districts. Competition for students is creating a market approach to education and homeschooling parents are using their rights to shop around for the best program for their child or children. There may, in fact, be nothing particularly new to hearing that teachers, administrators and other officials sometimes, as anywhere in the world, do not follow all rules and regulations. Parents appear thankful for it.

Parent’s concerns with their compliance with ministry of education requirements regarding homeschooling were tempered by a degree of apparent acceptance by school districts of parent’s autonomy regarding children’s educational programs.

Certain comments made by a number of parents suggest that there was some flexibility in how closely public school homeschool programs followed Ministry of Education guidelines. Parents mentioned these relaxing of rules in a positive way. Most parents interviewed were happy with the individual teacher that was their contact person. Typically the teacher would either meet in person with the parent, or on the telephone at the beginning of the school year. At that time parent and teacher work together to set up a
plan for the child. The teacher might outline the grade curriculum and choose Prescribed Learning Outcomes (PLOs) that needed to be covered.

Government/State involvement in homeschooling parent’s lives is an area for further research. The Home School Legal Defense Association of Canada (HSLDA) advocates strongly for minimal governmental involvement in homeschooling. HSLDA writes that enrollment in school board run Distributed Learning ‘homeschool’ programs allows “the government to bring the secular public system into home school families.” Also, HSLDA refers to homeschooling DEL programs as “a government “voucher” system that is very dangerous for homeschoolers. It attacks the soul of the traditional home school movement”, argues an article in their summer 2002 court report. “HSLDA advises B.C. families to fight to maintain their freedom by resisting the offer of the “poisoned pill” of the DEL.”

Similar sentiments can be found from European sources. Amanda Petrie writes “In some countries the state interferes too much in a fundamental right of parents to decide the education of their children. In addition”, argues Petrie, “evidence persists that some governments are further restricting the rights of parents to educate children at home.”

Statistics on the numbers of homeschoolers are imprecise at best, though there is often acknowledgement that a certain percentage of parents will neither register nor enroll their children. These parents, who are technically breaking the law by not


informing some part of the education system of their decision to homeschool, are likely small in number. Due to the secretiveness of their choices they are not a minority that would be easy to contact for their opinions on public school homeschooling. Clearly though their choosing not to participate with, nor inform the state of their decision is an indicator of their mistrust, or antipathy towards the state as represented by The Ministry of Education. In day-to-day dealings with parents who choose to homeschool through the public school system I would suggest that there is awareness on the part of school staff that parents are not always 100% supportive of all aspects of schooling laws and regulations. Particularly in the last 5 to 10 years which have seen many large-scale changes to *The School Act* affecting homeschoolers. These factors, along with the newness of many programs, may explain why some programs do 'interpret the law' to the benefit of parents.

Distributed Learning and Homeschooling have different legal definitions, rights and responsibilities under the *School Act* or *Independent School Act*. The difference, particularly regarding funding, may play a large part in school districts choosing to turn a blind eye to children’s programs. Distributed Learning Students are enrolled in a public or independent school program where the majority of the learning takes place at a distance. The educational program is the responsibility of the public or independent school. A British Columbia certified teacher directs and supervises the educational program\(^{59}\). The educational program must meet provincial standards outlined in the

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\(^{59}\) Ministerial Order 60/94, the *Student Learning Assessment Order*, Ministerial Order 191/94, the *Student Progress Report Order*, Ministerial Order 192/94, the *Provincial Letter Grades Order*, and Ministerial Order 190/91, the *Permanent Student Record Order*. 

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School Act or Independent School Act. Students enrolled must receive on-going regular assessment, report cards, provincial letter grades and a permanent student record. Public schools must offer a strictly secular program as per the School Act. School districts will receive the same annual per pupil funding for enrolled Distributed Learning students as they do for students enrolled in a school classroom, ($5753, estimate for 2005/2006 school year)

Homeschooled Children, as defined by the School Act, are registered as homeschooled children in a school within the school district where they live, or with a francophone or independent school. Homeschooled children’s educational program is the responsibility of their parents or guardians. The educational program is directed and supervised by the parent. Homeschooled children do not have to meet provincial standards, nor does the Ministry of Education inspect them. Homeschooled children do not receive a British Columbia Dogwood graduation certificate, however they may write Grade 12 provincial examinations at their registering school and receive a Ministry examination (not course) mark. Registered Homeschooled children may choose to include religious programs in their studies. A registering school district receives $250 per child and an independent school receives $175. These funds are provided for administering the registration process and offering educational resources and assessment instruments to parents. 

60 Specifically, Ministerial Order 295/95, the required Areas of Study in an Education Program Order, for students in Grade K-10, and Ministerial Order 205/95, the Graduation Requirements Order, for students in Grades 11 and 12. This policy change took place on May 10, 2002.
61 The above information was taken from the 2004-2005 Parent Handbook, from Delta School District’s Home Quest program, pg.6.
The most striking difference, from a school district operating perspective, is the $5503 difference between a registered and an enrolled student. This, combined with the removal of a cap on both enrollment and the number of locations allowed to offer Distributed Learning, may offer some explanation as to why districts seem willing to turn a blind eye to some ‘requirements’. By removing the enrollment cap districts have been forced to compete for students, as parents may choose to enroll in any district they choose, not just where they reside. Among parents interviewed for this research most had enrolled with more than one district. If the program did not appeal to the parents they simply enrolled in another program the next year. This exercising of their rights to school choice has a large economic impact on schools, as the loss of just twenty students represents over $100,000 less for public school districts. Rather than attempt to change the school’s policies or influence the development of programming most parents simply chose to demonstrate their displeasure by going elsewhere.\(^{62}\)

One important point of comparison is that when school districts register a homeschooler, they are still required to offer educational resources and assessment instruction to parents. One parent of an enrolled student complained “they never tell you that option when you are enrolling. They don’t want you to know about that because they won’t make any money off you.” This parent wished that more parents would register and referred to this as ‘real homeschooling’, or ‘traditional homeschooling.’ Though she

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\(^{62}\) Further research into the transience factor among homeschoolers could prove interesting. Advocates for school choice would support this as a way of encouraging parental choice and of forcing school districts to respond to parental demands or risk losing revenue. With so many new programs beginning, a long-term study comparing non-homeschooled students with homeschooled/Distributed Learning students could show a trend. I would hypothesize that children enrolled in public school distributed learning programs switch programs at more than double the rate of non-homeschooled children.
no longer did it that way, admitting that money was a deciding factor on choosing to enroll.

Offering educational resources (which is undefined), and assessment instruments to parents without any requirements to comply with the curriculum is an option that school districts would likely want to avoid from an economic viewpoint. The $250 would not allow districts to recover the costs of offering these services to parents. That said, it is an option available to parents and would likely fall to local school principals to determine the level of resources and assessment available. From a service viewpoint this option would lend itself to schools being used as a community resource for parents to use at their discretion. It could also serve as a way of staying in contact with homeschoolers and as one principal said, “keeping the doors open” to graduation options.

The most common area where schools seemed willing to turn a blind eye was on assessment and evaluation of students for grades. One parent saying that “[the school district] makes us pretend we are doing the BC curriculum”. This parent had said that her child did not like to do written work and built a portfolio instead. The portfolio was for Language Arts and received an A grade. Another parent said that although they had not completed a course of study, that together with the teacher they agreed to a final grade of A.

In another example a parent said that they had not followed the school plan at all and had no work to demonstrate learning in mathematics. Together with the teacher they gave the child a mark of B. One parent said that the school district she had been enrolled
with prior to 1999 had not seen any of the child’s work, met with the child, or done any assessment, and wrote a complete report card for the child.

One parent switched school districts stating “they are not as stringent with the curriculum that has to be used, with the outcomes that have to be met. Another parent spoke of collecting anecdotes of what her child had written on a chalkboard. She said the teachers were fine with that, as assessment. Another school district had, according to one parent, begun “wanting more demonstrated observations of learning... [They] used to have a default to C grading. Everyone needs a grade and you can pick a C if you wish. I didn’t hand in anything and they gave [one child] a D. When I complained to them they said they would get him a C.” One homeschool organizer for a district had homeschooled their own children according to one interviewee. “They got involved...trying to make it fit. Whatever your homeschool philosophy was, it fit in with [the district program]. I think that was [their] goal.”

Two parents specifically mentioned auditing as a factor for school districts. One saying that their district was going to tighten up around demonstrated learning in the upcoming year as they believed they were going to be audited. A parent commented that after a recent conference for Distributed Electronic Learning programs “the ministry is going to really be coming down on them.” The same parent said that two of the district teachers she was assigned to laughed at the focus on prescribed learning resources, saying “teachers don’t use the primary resources all the time, so how are they going to make parents comply with that?”
A parent said that her initial choice of program was based on her perception that "they [the school district] were offering the most money for the least amount of reporting." "The only stressful part of homeschooling for me is at report card time," said one parent, who said that she did not enjoy having to grade her child. Though some parents reported using the schoolteachers to consult with weekly and felt that they benefited from the guidance, most met less frequently with teachers, several only getting together twice a term.

One parent spoken to by telephone, and wishing to remain anonymous, said "there was a lot of pretending and doing it for the ministry. Technically", she said, "I am unschooling, and self-designing". The same parent, who was an active member of a local homeschool support group, said that in her experience most parents called around looking for alternative homeschooling options after receiving report cards. As something of a contradiction to my suggestion that districts are turning a blind eye to certain ministerial regulations, this parent argued that a program she had left was "not willing to bend... and that audits were being used to make us comply." Ironically, it may be this flight from accountability that districts need to think creatively about.

"They [school personnel] are after you, they want you so badly; they wanted to get the financing for your child. The next year they were phoning me to make sure I was going to be on the books." These words were from a woman who had an agreement with the local school principal to homeschool her children; yet remain on two class lists at her local public school. The two children represented over $10 000 for the school. This action on the part of a local administrator may suggest an economic imperative for turning a
blind eye toward ministerial regulations, which were clearly being breeched in not reporting the children as being homeschooled. 63

School districts are genuinely interested in making their homeschool programs fit the needs of parents. Anecdotal reports suggest that there is a quiet understanding that sometimes develops between parents and district personnel. An understanding that sometimes appears to not hold parents strictly to the letter of the law regarding the School Act. Though there do not appear to be major discrepancies as was the case with the Gold Trail School district, there is an indication that school districts sometimes skirt around the formal ministry mandates. This tendency could be motivated by the very real need to retain parents, and therefore the per-pupil funding that goes along with them.

63 That said, this parent was extremely supportive of public schooling and returned both children to the same school within a year and a half of beginning homeschooling. This could be interpreted as a very creative, and proactive decision by the principal and vice-principal to maintain the children “officially” on the school rolls, since it turned out that both children returned to their local school.
Dialogue Around the Kitchen Table

The use of dialogue to explore ideas is as classic as Plato, or as contemporary as Jane Jacobs. "This venerable literary form is suited to expounding inquiry and developing argument, but also because the form implicitly invites a reader to join the characters and enter the argument. A book is equipped to speak for itself, more so than any other artifact." My discussion will hopefully unveil some of the common threads of conversation that parents and children could share.

Three parents in a kitchen discuss their children’s education. Amanda, mother of three, and homeschooler of the two eldest boys, with a daughter, 2 years of age. Marie, mother of a Kindergarten aged girl, and seven year old boy, John, father and homeschooler of four children ranging in ages from five to 13 years of age.

Amanda: I am happy with what the schools are doing to help me with homelearning. I would say they run a good programme. Yes it is new, and has some areas that could be improved on, but so does anything when it is first starting up. The teachers and principal have been very helpful in setting up a programme that works for our boys and they seem to genuinely want to help tailor the programme for us. Our music lessons, books, aquarium pass, bird sanctuary and naturalist club memberships and countless magazine subscriptions are all covered through the programme. All we have to do is hand in the receipts and we get a refund. We can claim up to $900 a school year per child.

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Marie: Our limit is $900 as well but they deduct $350 for the computer, which is a terrific deal; we get Internet hookup, CD capability and good technical support. I am glad I switched school districts. Even though this one we are enrolled in now is far north and we rarely see anyone face to face, they are much more organized than the local one I tried last year. I think they have had electronic delivery for homeschoolers for over ten years. They were one of the first districts to pilot the idea of homeschooling through the public system. My seven year old loves using the computer, he can hand his work in on-line and his teacher will correct it and get back to him, sometimes on the same day.

John: I wonder about how much control we are encouraging the schools to have over our children’s education. When we first started teaching our own children at home it was, in part, because I really was frustrated with the poor quality of an undisciplined teacher, and the principal’s refusal to move my child into another class. The only contact I needed was to register my child’s name with our local school in September. After that I was on my own to do and teach as I saw fit. Registration really meant I was completely responsible for my children’s education. The new public programs all need you to enroll, not register, but enroll. Enrolling your child means that a BC certified teacher is responsible for your child. Not you… a teacher! Can that be homeschooling?

65 In 2003 the British Columbia Ministry of Education changed The School Act to allow parents to choose any school to attend regardless of where they resided. This choice model allowed children to not only attend schools outside of their catchment area, but out of their district as well. Combined with the elimination of numerical limits on how many homeschooling students each district could enroll, a climate of competition for the $5000+ dollars that went to each district per enrolled homelearner was a natural result.
You must have three report cards a year and use only government approved resources. I wonder if my desire to use the money they have offered, which is no small amount, is drawing me back to the same public system I once withdrew my kids from?\footnote{Simon Hersey of the Home School Legal Defense Association refers to this as the poison pill. He argues that as school districts give money to those parents enrolling, and nothing to those who register, parents are on a slippery slope towards eventually losing many of their freedoms to homeschool. There are precedents in Canada and the United States (particularly Alberta and Montana) where after several years of government involvement in homeschooling, all parents became required to be overseen by various authorities, typically the state or provincial education ministry.}

\textit{Amanda:} But it is not the same at all. Your children are at home with you and your wife, not in a classroom with twenty-five or thirty same aged children.\footnote{The idea of same aged peers, as is most common in graded classrooms, is one mentioned often by parents as an undesirable part of public schools. Children forming friendships and playing and learning with children of different ages is common among homeschooling families.} We have talked before and I know a lot of what works for both our kids is not being at the school building itself. We are their teachers now. Our homes and neighbourhoods are the classrooms. The school may say its teacher is responsible for the educational programme, and if that allows them to get more money for their district, fine. But I know that it is me who is really responsible for the day-to-day realities of my children’s education. I would not be homeschooling if I wanted to hand over my child’s learning to someone else. If the public schools are opening up to a growing alternative of homeschoolers then maybe that is a sign that public schools are themselves beginning to change. Personally I feel that public school involvement, whether you call it marketing or appeasing, in home schooling is a sign of just what a powerful trend teaching your children at home is becoming.\footnote{In 1979 2000 Canadian children were home-schooled. By 1996, provincial ministries of education (Quebec is excluded as they do not keep such statistics) put the number of home-schooled children at 17 523, or 0.4 percent of total student enrolment- a 776 percent increase over 18 years. Some home schooling associations claim that over 80 000 Canadian students are taught in private homes annually. See Luffman, Jacqueline (1998) “When Parents Replace Teachers: The Home Schooling Option.” \textit{Canadian Social Trends}, Autumn 1998.} You are not being drawn back to the same system, John. The public school
system is adapting and changing for you because you chose to homeschool. Sure it is for the money, but I also see a fundamental acceptance by the school authorities of the validity of what we are doing. The schools have had to change because so many more people are choosing to educate their own children at home. They have seen the floodgates opening as more and more people leave their system and they are working to win them back. Sometimes they even turn a blind eye to some of the ministry regulations. I threatened to take my $10 000 worth of children somewhere else if they kept insisting on taking those FAS tests, and making me show proof for every last PLO. The principal explained that they had an accountability contract and that the government could audit them at any time, so they had to be prepared. I told him he would have to find a way to make it work for me because I thought his program was about serving the needs of the parents, not the government. He said he would see what he could do, and do you know what? End of the year came and we did not write the FSA, and they rewrote some PLOs to accommodate us.

**John:** I am still skeptical. Not many people disagree that British Columbia has some of the most liberal and unfettered laws regarding parent’s rights to homeschool. With more and more people enrolling just to get some of the tax perks and write-offs, we are losing our autonomy to choose our own way to educate. Marie, can you tell me that all your children are doing is “approved” by the government? If it’s secular, yes. But what about other ways to learn, other sources of knowledge?

**Marie:** I think of the wonderful project the children did on the role of faith in their community volunteer time. Their portfolio showed both the factual details of hours spent with seniors at the hospital, at the museum and cleaning the ravines, as well as what they
learned about their part in the community. The children quoted scripture in their project to explain why they did what they did. Even the teacher at the school said how impressed she was by their arguments, their footnoting, everything. The school wanted to show the project at an open house they had. Here is the strange part though: They asked that we remove some of the graphics and pictures that were clearly of a Christian nature. So they liked the idea, but it did need some modifying. I think I can safely say that there is a quiet understanding between the teacher and I. She knows that I am Christian and that faith plays a central part in our home. We have talked about it. I remember that she said balance is what is important. She will look after ensuring that we can graduate with a Dogwood certificate, and we are free to do any additional studies as we see fit. I think it is something that they just turn a blind eye to. As long as they can pass an audit they are fine.

Amanda: I am keeping a learning journal on-line with Bobby’s teacher. It keeps me focused and as I look back I realize just how much we are doing. We are also using a projects portfolio so when we sit down with the teacher to determine marks we have clear evidence of his learning. He loves doing his work on the computer and it is way better for his confidence because he had such a hard time with writing out by hand. I don’t mind a certain amount of accountability to the school districts. It helps me stay focused and it makes a huge difference with how the grandparents view what we are doing. Before we enrolled, they were always asking if I was really qualified and if I was teaching this or

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69 Several parents suggested that school districts were allowing parents to teach as they saw fit and that parents and teachers had an unspoken agreement to work around ministerial requirements. Descriptions were given where parents were free to design their own program despite directives to the contrary that BCTF members supervise. As one parent put it, “She (the teacher) pretended to ask about what we were doing, and I pretended to tell her, and that was good enough.” One parent stated that her daughter once received a full report card from a teacher who had never met her and only seen one sample of her work.
teaching that. Now, they know it is done through the school and they don’t make such a
big deal about it anymore. They are even coming around to our beliefs about multi-age
teaching.

*John:* It is funny that you mention that, because just yesterday my parents came
over and were talking about the problems that my nephew is having at school. He has
hooked up with some bad kids and the mum is having a heck of a time with him. My
mother says that when he is at home and around his little brother and sister he is still kind
and caring, but when he gets in with all the other boys his age he acts like a delinquent.
She tries to get him to play with other children, but he is in the same class with these boys
at school and they can’t keep them apart. My mother even suggested homeschooling him
for a year, but how can a single mother, with a full time job, do that? It is a shame
though, because she is right, he is a caring boy when he is around other aged children.
Most children are more mature and less likely to show off when they have a different
range of children around them.

*Marie:* It makes me think of the one-room-schoolhouse. It is a shame that there
are so many schools closing around British Columbia because enrollment is going down.
It seems that the only new idea the government ever has is to make bigger and bigger
schools. Imagine community schools that were small and multi-aged. Grades K to seven
all in one section. If they did that I might even consider sending my children back.

*Amanda:* It sure would be great, but it is not going to happen. Schools are about
politics and money. They are less and less about giving the best education to our children
and more and more about saving money and providing the cheapest, in both senses of the word, education available.

*John:* Governments may be trying to save money, but as more and more people discover homeschooling they will have to respond to us. We are leading the way and the teachers and administrators would be wise to try and learn from us, because our education is better. The trick for them is to learn and understand what and how we do it better. What is that academic expression “More research is needed”.

Anyways I have to go. I am mentoring another boy who wants to take engines apart and learn to be a mechanic. See you later.

*Amanda:* I have to get off to the library and get some books on someone called Sam Loyd. My eldest is absolutely hooked on math puzzles and games, and says he wants to be just like Sam Loyd. If he is that interested I think I should brush up on my math a bit too so I can help him find his way. Besides, I always learn a lot doing the research.

*Marie:* Could I join you? I haven’t been to the library in weeks and we could do with some new Harry Potter books. The kids just love those stories. We’ll walk together with the kids. I have a couple of things I want to talk about and I could use your support.
Lessons Learned and Future Directions

Homeschooling is far from being a new approach, however homeschooling through the public school system is a new trend in education that is likely to continue growing in popularity. Choosing to teach children at home in British Columbia through public school programs is an option available to any parent that has the time and desire to do so. Legislative changes have made it financially advantageous for school districts to offer services and programs to the homeschooling community. Once an educational alternative on the periphery of the education system, homeschooling programs are becoming mainstream and gaining acceptance as public schools offer support and guidance to parents choosing this approach.

Parents interviewed expressed concerns with the inability of the mainstream classroom to offer their children a personalized, safe and stimulating education. Large class-sizes, concerns with teachers, and class composition were also discussed as factors in choosing to homeschool rather than send their child to a classroom. Philosophical and pedagogical issues were also important for some parents in deciding to teach their own children. Parents demonstrated a strong willingness to make a program fit their child rather than having their child fit the program. This meant that parents switched programs when they believed they were not working in the best interests of their children.

Though sometimes critical of some particulars of public schooling, parents were generally supportive of the need for public schooling and often made a point of saying
they did not oppose public education. Parents were appreciative of public school district involvement in homeschooling. Critical family members and others were much more supportive of parent’s choice of homeschooling when discovering that they were doing it through a public school program. Parents often expressed respect for classroom teachers and principals and saw their profession as often difficult and challenging. All parents interviewed mentioned reduction of services at public schools as a problem, particularly regarding special needs students and music programming.

*Enrolling* of a child in a public or Independent school homeschooling program, or *registering* a child, are very different processes and avenues of study. Enrollment comes with the accountability requirement that a child’s educational program is overseen by an approved teacher, includes specific reporting, teaches no religious dogma, and follows ministry of education grade specific curriculum. Enrolled homeschooling students are taught by parents, but are the responsibility of teachers, and must participate in standardized testing. Enrollment in a homeschooling program brings the same dollar value to a district, or Independent school, as a student attending regular, full-time classes. Per pupil funding has been in excess of $5000, or 50% of that for Independent schools. The financial implications appear to have led districts to compete for students, since legislative changes allow full choice, by parents, of which school, or district, they enroll their child with. Districts, and Independent schools, refund approximately $1000 to parents and often provide other incentives such as computers and ‘pay-as-you-go field trips and classes. There is no cap on the number of students that can be enrolled. All of the interviewees in this study were enrolled in a program.
Registration as a homeschooler is very different from enrolling. Parents are required by law to register their child with either their local school, or several other options. Registration puts the parents wholly in charge of the educational program of the child, and does not require parents to either follow prescribed curriculum or report to anyone. Parents may still request materials and assessments from the registering school, but are free to determine and deliver their version of an educational program. There are no restrictions on the teaching of religion. Advocates of what is sometimes called ‘traditional, or real homeschooling’ refer to registration as the preferred option for parents, often citing the need for minimal intrusion on the part of government bodies on the rights of parents to educate their children at home. Registering schools receive a payment of $250 per pupil registered. There are no refunds available to parents. There is little competition for registering parents. Some legal advocates of homeschooling view enrollment and registration as a pivotal issue, and possible threat to parental rights. It is a contentious issue. Any group receiving 5000+ dollars would be unlikely to steer parents towards an option that would give their organization only a fraction of that money.

There would be nothing stopping a district from promoting registration over enrollment. Economically focused policy would suggest otherwise, however districts could provide services and resources through their local schools to any registering parent. Local training for principals and teachers could allow them to be more actively, and less hostilely, involved in a homeschooler’s learning. Should districts truly want to serve the needs of all children, whether they have an economic value, or not, can be shown through an acceptance, and actual promotion of an option that is not economically advantageous. Parents do see enrollment as more intrusive than registering. An independent school, or
district, able to work as a registering school could be a positive bridge between schools and parents who do not wish to have any association, testing or outside control of their child’s learning program. If the local school could be viewed as friendly to their needs, even traditional homeschoolers could end up using these schools. Registration versus enrollment is an economic argument for some and a freedom of rights issue for others. Schools should offer, and make parents aware of the options, for both services. This may be too much mission statement and not enough sound financial policy, however it would provide greater access to educational options to all citizens.

Computers play an important role in homeschooling for many school district programs. Entire curriculums are available on-line for many subjects, with more being developed. E-mailing and telephone conversations, along with visiting resource rooms, were the main forms of communications between parents and school districts. Some districts emphasize computer technology as their focus and provide on-going technical support, where others focus more on providing, and in some cases developing, curriculum resources. Computer technology has certainly facilitated communications with parents living great distances from schools.

Homeschooling and Public schooling were once polar opposites, oxymorons. Since the growth of educational alternatives, beginning in the 1960’s, homeschooling has developed into a major educational choice issue. There are still strong opinions within public schools that homeschooling is not a positive option. Homeschoolers have proven to be very capable advocates though, and research into homeschooling is almost entirely positive. Misinformation is a problem within the public schools regarding homeschooling, particularly among front-line teachers and office staff, who are
sometimes unaware of homeschooling as an option. Public schools are changing the way they treat homeschoolers and may at times not follow regulations to the letter. Whether this is done out of economic necessity or out of a need to tailor programs to individuals is uncertain.

There is no doubt that as an alternative form of education, homeschooling has gained considerable appeal. School districts would be wise to steer a course that takes into consideration the needs and concerns of parents who show every willingness to go to the district that best meets their needs. Efforts should also be made to learn from the experiences of homeschoolers and possibly discover new tools, strategies, and directions for change in a system seen by many as needing reform.
Appendix

Ministry of Education

Office of the Inspector of Independent Schools

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08/13/2003

Independent Schools

Distributed Electronic Learning (DEL) Pilot Project Standards

1. The Authority is responsible for delivering the educational program to the DEL students participating in its Distributed Electronic Learning (DEL) Program.

2. The Authority must register the DEL students participating in its Distributed Electronic Learning (DEL) Program with a Personal Education Number.

3. The Authority must ensure that the educational program and DEL student learning are directed by a certified teacher. In particular, the Authority must ensure that certified teachers:

   (a) complete course planning,

   (b) engage in on-going content/skill building instruction to DEL students,

   (c) assess and evaluate DEL student progress, and

   (d) report on DEL student achievement.
4. The Authority must ensure that certified teachers’ availability to DEL students meets or exceeds the minimal yearly instructional hours specified in the Minister’s *Educational Standards Order 41/91*.

5. The Authority must meet the educational standards for an educational program set out in the Minister’s *Educational Standards Order 41/91*.

6. Without limiting paragraph 5, the Authority, when providing the Distributed Electronic Learning (DEL) Program, (i) must meet the provincial learning outcomes, with implementation described in course overviews that include:
   (a) content,
   (b) variety of teaching strategies and learning activities,
   (c) assessment and evaluation method;
   (d) linkage with the Ministry’s curriculum organizers or authority-approved learning outcomes for courses as specified in the Minister’s *Educational Standards Order 41/91*, and
   (e) hands-on activities and collaborative and oral language experiences.
   (ii) must meet either the provincial learning outcomes or the learning outcomes established by the Authority for activities in Fine Arts, Physical Education, Applied Skills and Career and Personal Planning.

7. The Authority must assess, evaluate and report every DEL student participating in its Distributed Electronic Learning (DEL) Program as follows:
   (a) in a way that satisfies the Inspector,
   (b) by ensuring participation of every DEL student in provincial assessment and examination programs, and
(c) by complying with the Inspector’s *Reports, Records and Data Submission Order* 1/91.

8. The Authority must administer compulsory standardized testing of DEL student achievement that is supervised by a certified teacher and/or at a ministry-approved site with a ministry approved invigilator.

9. The Authority must maintain identification standards to establish authenticity of DEL students responding to assignments and taking tests. These standards must include physical or electronic visits by certified teachers of all DEL students.

10. The Authority must have technology and delivery infrastructure in place to ensure, to the satisfaction of the Inspector, reliable delivery of the educational program to and response from DEL students’ computers with minimal interruption.

11. The Authority must deliver a significant portion of the Distributed Electronic Learning (DEL) Program through electronic means.
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